

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

APRIL 1999

LOVE CAN BE MURDER

The inspector took to hanging around the pub. A man had gone missing...

BY JEFFRY
SCOTT

Plus...

D.A. McGuire

Ann Ripley

Nancy Springer

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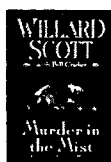
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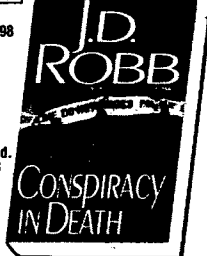


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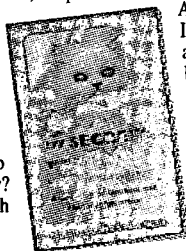
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

If you will cast your minds back to our January issue—the one we make our Christmas issue insofar as we have one (it depends on how many Christmas stories authors send us)—you may recall that in this space, as our holiday “greeting card” from AHMM’s staff, a tourist looking suspiciously like Mr. Hitchcock was standing, map in hand, in some bewilderment on the corner of East 32nd Street and Park Avenue South.

Well, we’ve moved. That is, we will have moved by the time you read this. We *thought* we’d be moving in time for Hank Blaustein’s illustration to show us at our new locale, but the Fates (a group, it turns out, engaged in office remodeling) decreed otherwise.

So *now* the picture makes sense!

We wanted to take this chance to mention the move to those of you who submit manuscripts to us (see

the contents page for the editorial offices’ address) or who write the editorial department for other reasons. (This has nothing to do with subscriptions, by the way.) And if you’ve sent something to the old address, don’t worry. It will be forwarded.

In this issue . . . from England, a new story by Jeffery Scott, who is always intriguing. From D. A. McGuire, her second story about Carrie Drew and Jake Valari (the first, “The Jet Stone,” was in our December issue). And we have one new author to welcome this time—new to us, at least. Ann Ripley, author of “Woman in a Box,” writes the Louise Eldridge “garden” mysteries published by Bantam; her new book in the series, *The Garden Tour Affair*, is just out. Ms. Ripley is a former newspaper reporter and the mother of six daughters. This is her first short story.

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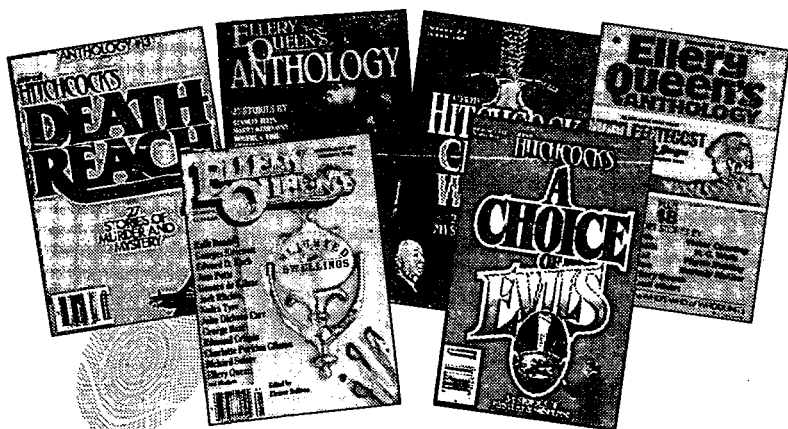
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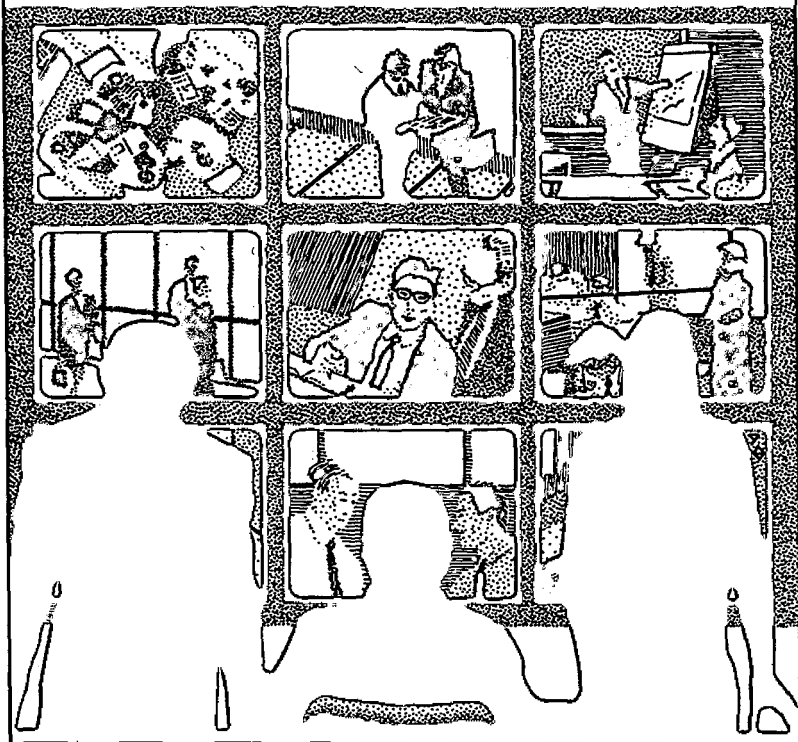
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LOVE CAN BE MURDER

Jeffry Scott



I never learn, Sam Tyler thought. Too late now, Trish Phillips had seen him, her wave of welcome nearly capsizing her from the stool by the bar, so he put a pleased expression in place. Sam vowed never to dark-

en the BAP's door again, knowing the pledge was worthless. The landlord of the Coach & Horses was tickled by the Tek-Rama crowd's nickname for his place and assumed it was affectionate. Tek-Rama staff were what his



generation called boffins, not just using computers but designing the things, so they were bound to be a little weird. In fact BAP was an acronym for Bloody Awful Pub; however, it was nearest the Crystal Palace and the only one between there and Chaffingwell where Sam Tyler lodged.

Trish Phillips, grainy patches under her eyes providing the strongest color on a slack face; air-kissed Sam and slurred, "Wojja havin'?"

"I'll take care of this—it's pay night."

"Don't patronize me." Stumbling slightly on the middle word. "Your sal'ry comes monthly, same as my beloved husband's."

She groped in her purse, producing banknotes.

"They're paying him till the end of the year. Must believe it's worth preten'ing he's on a shabbatical—endless one—though we all know Mick's done a runner."

"You could be right." Experience had schooled Tyler to agree with drunks.

"This is a celebration." Trish raised her voice to announce with bravado. "Anniversary, three months since Mick walked out on me."

Inwardly Sam whimpered although he smiled awkwardly, a lean, square-faced young man with steady eyes behind rimless glasses. Mick Phillips' wife hadn't always been overweight and drowned looking, nor a pathetic embarrassment. She might pass as a slatternly fifty rather than

fifteen years younger, but he knew better.

Mood switching, she said, "They think he sold them out, you know. Blazer-men rooting through our home, days on end. Mick wouldn't doublecross the sacred company, not while he has me to cheat on. Some little tart is keeping him longer than the standard lost weekend. She'll have no brain, no class—but no stretchmarks and worry lines, either."

"Where has Mick taken himself off to, then?" This from a shabbily jaunty, middle-aged man, mouth a thin, crinkly line. After brazen eavesdropping, evidently he felt entitled to share his impudent question between Sam and Trish.

"Shove off," Sam snapped, to which the pest replied meekly, "Excuse I, cobber," in a fake Australian accent, and returned to his pint of bitter. Sam gave Crinkly-mouth a sharp look. Born near Birmingham, he was as English as anyone in the BAP that evening. Sam's parents had tried Australia for a few years, but having returned with them at fifteen, he didn't sound the least Australian any more . . . did he?

Dealing with his own glass of bitter as swiftly as possible, he took Trish's arm. "I'll walk you home, sweetheart."

"No, I wanna stay. 'Come, let us sit upon the ground and swap sad stories of the death of kings,'" she misquoted Shakespeare, gesturing so widely that but for Sam's grasp she would have landed on the floor. "The kids are fine, know



I'm just up the road. Let's stay, one more drinkie."

"Places to go, people to see, the pair of us."

"Ooh, you're so masterful! I'm a married woman, shame on you, waylaying me."

He winced anew; Trish had never been like that before, either.

After she'd been half-supported, half-towed out of the BAP, a farmworker chortled, "Any port in a storm, eh? He looks to be on a promise with her, right enough."

The crinkly-lipped man stared coldly. "Scrub your mind out, pal. Dr. Tyler will wait for the lady to pass out on the couch, throw a blanket over her, entertain her two boys for an hour, and take himself off."

"How d'you make all that out? X-ray vision, see through walls?"

"Use your head, I'm psychic. 'Night, all."

The landlord put the ribald drinker straight. "He's a copper, you berk, been dropping in regular lately. If I was Mrs. P., I'd be worried. She's the one his sights are on, stands to reason. Maybe her old man did do a runner, he's a demon for skirts. But she has a temper, and ol' Mick was leading her a right dance. She wouldn't be the first to do hubby in and cop the insurance money. He's been gone ages, right?"

Mine host of the BAP didn't believe a word of his theory, but this was a dull district and he had a morbidly inventive turn of mind.

Sam Tyler helped Darren Phil-

lips with history homework and Dean with geography homework, performed rusty conjuring tricks, and told all the seemly jokes he could recall, which hadn't taken long. He'd also made a wretched attempt to pass Mum's conduct off as "nerves and overtiredness," pretending not to hear Dean's bitter whisper, "She's drunk, not tired." Trudging up the long hill to Chaffingwell, he grumbled mentally that his daily good turns had been used up for months ahead.

On a clear night, not quite frosty, he paused at a gap in the hedge and stared down the valley. Tek-Rama, proud of its new United Kingdom headquarters defacing a green-fields site, made no effort to blend with the scenery. The Crystal Palace was an uncompromisingly metropolitan cube with beveled corners. From half a mile away it seemed all glass although slender concrete columns and lintels punctuated the expanse. By day the Crystal Palace hardly deserved the mocking label coined by inmates, for its one-way glass was dark. In bright moonlight, though, the crystal simile was justified. Front wall mirroring the full moon, the Palace became a surreal painting—two skies at once, clear behind the building but with moon and clouds reflected on the man-made inset.

Sam grunted dismissively. His corner of that place, the Play-Pen, was okay, but he'd never been crazy about Tek-Rama itself and recently he had fallen



right out of love with the company. Ten months to go on his contract—subtract weekends and vacation time and it could be seen as only a matter of weeks.

Walking on, Sam debated whether he was more wimp than hypocrite. An honest man would have turned on his heel at sight of Trish Phillips and to hell with hurting her feelings. He'd played the family friend, yet if she hadn't spotted him coming in . . . "Hypocrite, definitely," he said out loud, posing as hardbitten and cynical to excuse emotional wariness—which brought him back to Laura Greene, supposedly a no-go subject. Easier said than done. Similar to ordering somebody not to think of, for instance, a beachball or the word "Hampshire." Guaranteed to have the reverse effect.

Duly, he had a flashback of long hair parting over Laura's shoulder as she reached across him in bed, evoking a romantic simile of sunlit water cascading over rounded white boulders it partly obscured—"Forget it!" Dr. Tyler exclaimed, lengthening stride. Yet within a hundred yards he slowed abruptly. Sam rented the largest of widow Tollard's bedrooms, a chamber she insisted on terming My Best Behind. Ma Tollard's house, the far end of Church Lane, was off by itself, so the owner of the white MG-F parked outside was visiting no other dwelling.

She wasn't visiting Ma Tollard; for that matter, Laura Greene was waiting for him and, aware of the attraction of turning on

one's heel, had made that impossible. For she was the sentry he must pass unless he wanted to sleep under the stars.

Sam doubted whether he would enjoy the next few minutes, and he hoped it would be that short.

Laura Greene uncoiled from the bathtub depths of the sports car and leaned against it, long legs crossed at the ankles, arms folded. Dark pants, black leather jacket, pale waterfall of hair stark by contrast. She got right to it before he could utter. "Don't be all clenched, I just want to have my say. I'm not going to call you a nasty, ungracious bastard. I don't do that. Though you are, of course." She spoke quietly, obliging him to stand close. Providing the actual words were ignored, she sounded pleasantly conversational.

"Thing is, I don't do one-nighters either." The hair swung as she tilted her head, listening to the statement. "Only it seems I do, thanks to you. It's my own fault, never have flings with colleagues, disaster guaranteed. I've broken the rule . . . um, only twice, and both turned out badly."

Flings? echoed the dissident in his head. Flings plural? I don't like the sound of that. No longer sardonic but callowly jealous. Flustered, he slammed that door of his mind. If her line of former lovers stretched around the block Laura was entitled: an Older Woman, after all. Sure, exactly four years older than you, the heckler shouted through the slammed door's keyhole.



She was still talking. "Frankly, I liked the look of you from the day you started with us." (Aha, condemned out of her own mouth, with that "us.") "You're a barbarian, know nothing outside your particular discipline and expertise, but that goes for ninety percent of the Play-Pen and they are geeks and nerds or just totally unprepossessing into the bargain.

"He's nice, that was my take. Still is, with strong reservations." Laura folded her arms the other way, preparing the next segment of lecture. "Okay, I was favorably inclined. No plans, but if we got together, that would be interesting and probably nice. And, well, it happened . . . the Haunted Ballroom and all that."

Trying to distance himself, Sam noted that hard-core, Old Guard Tek-Rama people had a mania for avoiding the given names of anything from candy bars to colleagues or famous politicians. The Haunted Ballroom was the Chaffleigh Manor Hotel, a decrepit place full of the smell of frequent rain, only indoors.

Three weeks ago he and Laura Greene were stranded there when her car broke down on the way back from a science fair in the Midlands. The Chaffleigh Manor seemed to have no other patrons and hardly more staff; it did not serve dinner after seven at night but did sell champagne. They demolished a bottle on returning from a fast-food place, and, and . . . "It was very nice," Laura conceded, a prim usage that failed to strike

him as odd. "All right, it was the first time and they are . . . fraught. If you didn't think much of it," she continued earnestly, "put that down to its being the first time. It would have got better, trust me. Not with practice, that sounds terrible though it's true, but from getting to know each other and how to share."

He couldn't believe that she was assessing the Haunted Ballroom encounter as if they'd gone skiing together, or tested their suitability as teamed bridge players . . . Hackles of sexism bristled; further, despite a little more than three decades on the planet, he was shocked. Progressing from grammar school scholarship to double First, then further potent initials after his name on papers, had left Sam Tyler little time for an active social life. There had been some relationships, not many and not conspicuous successes: previous partners never addressed between-sheets experience with such candor, or even at all. For him it was culture shock as much as stuffiness.

"Don't get me wrong," Laura warned sharply. "I'm not pleading, and my vanity isn't bruised. But I do have this hunch you're a nice guy being a graceless jerk out of ignorance. Sorry, but judging by the sequel to the Haunted Ballroom, you are easily mistaken for a real four-letter person, a shocker."

Here it comes, Sam informed himself, torn by a paradoxical blend of shame and relief that at last she was ready to rant at him.



His mistake. Laura's tone turned confiding, and wounding-ly reasonable. "You're an attractive man, I won't be the last woman thinking so, and it would be a shame if all the others feel badly treated. So here's the crash course for when you decide a fling is a mistake—don't look like thunder and flee. Don't change your mind about lunch, make a rotten job of remembering an urgent appointment because the only vacant seat is at the mistake's table. You definitely don't start leaving your car outside the BAP and walk five hundred yards sooner than risk meeting her in the office parking lot."

Overtly losing her thread, she reminisced, "After my degree I explored the States, Greyhound all the way. There was this incredibly poignant graffiti on a wall at the Port Authority place where I started. 'New York girls cold, grabby. West Coast girls smile, say hi.' That's what it's about, Sam, smiling and saying hi afterwards. Think of it as basic politeness. You're a kind man, don't let yourself down again."

"Look," he protested hoarsely, and couldn't come up with a coherent remark. Dear God, this was difficult. "I thought, um, it was my fault, I took advantage of you, we were drunk and then . . . I didn't want you thinking I was, you know, expecting it would happen again. I thought you'd want to forget the whole thing."

"Such a lot of thinking," she said lightly. "Drunk on two glasses of champagne? And what's

this my-fault stuff? We got as close as humans can, physically anyway, didn't commit murder or rob a bank." Laura squeezed his arm in reassurance. "You just felt ashamed of yourself?"

Sam was tempted, but then the prospect of meeting her honesty with evasion filled him with self-contempt. "Mainly, it wouldn't work. We could . . . get fond of each other, right? But I've had it with Tek-Rama, end of story. I'm off next year. You are a hundred percent company, you'd never quit. This time next year I could be in California or Timbuktu, so what's the point?"

"I helped start the firm, I've been in it from the beginning," she said defensively. "Barry and Ken gave me founder shares when they went public; of course I'm loyal." Belatedly angry, she punched the arm she'd been holding, making him yelp.

"Arrogant, stupid man! You haven't listened to a word. Get fond of each other? I'm not talking courtship, dumb. Just suggesting you stop treating me as if I ought to be ringing a bell and going, 'Unclean, unclean.' Out to hook you? Don't make me laugh."

"Oh."

"Le mot juste," Ms. Greene agreed crisply.

"Crossed wires. Sorry. I didn't mean to be . . . everything you said."

"Obviously not, or I wouldn't try educating you. Heigh-ho, you'll know better next time."

Laura Greene ducked into the low-slung car and slammed the



door. Sam squatted beside it. "Hey, coast down the slope before you start up." Ma Tollard's bedroom light was out, and the widow was a martyr to insomnia; once wakened, she would stay that way for fretful hours.

"Strange—you can be so considerate over things that don't matter a damn." The MG went whispering and crunching down the lane. Sam Tyler did not go indoors until long after ruby tail-lights vanished round the curve.

He saw her again within twelve hours in the Crystal Palace's atrium, more of a courtyard under glass. Sam walked in behind Laura, caught himself lagging back, and speeded up to tap her shoulder as she signed in at the desk.

"Better," she mouthed, and aloud, brightly, "Good morning, Sam." She waited for him to show his pass and scribble in the desk man's ledger, then took his arm. "See how easy it is?"

Steering him away from the elevator to the Play-Pen, she sat down on a marble bench. "Now we chat briefly." Sam wasn't listening. Resentfully he watched one of the closed-circuit cameras, a steel bird of prey keeping vigil from its high perch, turn a narrow head their way, single eye glinting. Sam Tyler acknowledged that Tek-Rama might not be paranoid, it was suffering persecution. Industrial espionage had nearly ruined the company a few years back; Ken and Barry Loring couldn't forget that. The

cameras were pervasive. Ingoing and outgoing phone calls were taped and the tapes monitored. Security men, the Blazers, infested the Crystal Palace. Young and fit, they tended to be ex-soldiers (Ken Loring was a militaria freak, buying old tanks instead of statuary for the grounds of his Surrey mansion).

Admittedly, the guardians and snoopers were personable and low-key. Some wore navy blazers over charcoal slacks, looking like members of the same athletic squad dressed up for a post-tournament dinner. Others wore dove-grey blazers and matching pants, looking lost without limo doors to open for VIP's. Sam had worked out that the dove-greys were glorified porters and commissionaires, the navy blues the more skilled security presence. Both tribes shared alertness or nosiness, according to one's viewpoint.

Occasionally the staff protested at the invasion of privacy, arguing that bugging and phone tapping, not to mention snap searches for documents or components, were probably illegal and undeniably tiresome. Getting into the Play-Pen, for instance, was akin to entering a missile silo. Evidently the Loring brothers considered that protests and low morale were acceptable prices of vigilance. The Loring's response was that nobody had to work for them. Fair enough, Dr. Tyler granted, but official suspicion and wariness still rankled.

Infuriatingly, just when surveil-



lance was registering as an over-reaction, Mick Phillips had walked out, justifying Tek-Rama's anxiety. As a marketing executive Mick knew about developments, promising and otherwise. And he'd taken hardcopied data with him, or so authoritative rumors claimed. Ken Loring had made a rare appearance in the Play-Pen to denounce the rumors as rubbish—indicating the opposite to cynics. Sam felt from personal experience that missing documents meant nothing. Mick believed rules were for others, he'd regularly breached regulations by taking work home, gambling that the Blazers wouldn't search his bulky briefcase. He was even older Old Guard than Laura Greene, a veteran of the Loring brothers' previous business ventures.

"You're doing it again, going away without moving," Laura chided, snapping Sam's reverie. "You do that a lot, it's off-putting."

"Sorry."

"And stop saying sorry. Now you've made a start, we might as well launch Stage Two. That's a meal after work, going dutch, naturally."

"I'd like that." So he did, but only in principle, as it were.

"When?" Laura prompted, and while he was stammering, she swept on, "You never do anything after work, you're hopeless, so you must fit in with me. I'm booked this evening, and it's my dancercise class tomorrow night. Thursday, then."

Another camera had begun staring. Surprise, a man in a blue blazer was coming this way. "Sorry, I mean, say again, what was that?"

"Thursday, meet me by the front desk at six. Six sharp, there's a bistro worth trying and it's the far side of Reading, take us ages to get there." Laura glanced up. "Hello, Gavin, we're conspiring. Nothing sinister, Dr. Tyler's putting the moves on me."

Sam mused that the world split into two camps—his breed, who forgot or never knew the names of most people around them, and the Laura Greenes, collecting at least the first names of everyone in existence.

Gavin—McDonald, from his lapel badge—went pink at being recognized but took a stab at matching her style. "Uh, good for you, miss, don't do anything I wouldn't do." Padding past, he knelt near the bench and fiddled with a litter bin, adjusting its angle to the glass wall. He'd been snooping, right enough. Ten months less weekends and vacations; roll on, the Freedom Train.

"Thursday," Laura repeated mock-sternly, "six sharp. That's a day after Wednesday that isn't any of the others. Date, got it?" She tapped away towards her office. Sam made eye contact with Gavin, who seemed about to speak, decided against it, and looked away. Half his mind on Laura Greene, Sam snarled silently that he had a lot to put up with, one way and another.



He was unaware that, any day now, somebody would kill his bicycle.

It went like this: at four thirty P.M. that Thursday Dr. Samuel Tyler was looking forward to meeting Laura. The bistro was an attraction, too—widow Tollard's motherliness foundered when it came to cooking.

At four forty-five P.M. he was still mildly expectant, and at eight twenty-six P.M. he gave Play-Pen colleagues a hell of a shock by yelling, "It's Thursday, look at the bloody time!" and pelted out, bouncing off the corner of a workbench. He yanked at and cursed the door he was pulling, despite having pushed it open on perhaps four hundred previous occasions, and he was heard—through another set of doors—reasoning with the security guard out there in a bellow.

"Lost it," somebody said with open satisfaction. Somebody else agreed, part seriously, that Sam was too long in the tooth for tantrums. They'd been arguing fiercely about Ganymede, the house name for a new approach to artificial intelligence. Emotions had been vented, progress made, everyone having a grand time.

Later that night, having borrowed the widow Tollard's deplorable old Nissan, Sam was parking outside Laura's house in Drumwell, the county town. He had rung her, of course—not from Tek-Rama, in case personal conversation was destined for tap-

ing—and received an answering-machine snub obviously intended for him. "This is Laura Greene, in a thoroughly bad mood. I may pick up, so say who you are, but I probably won't."

Borderline cryptic, but it did the job, persuading him to forget phone negotiations. Laura lived in Drumwell, a market town twelve miles away—the phone book yielded her address. Taking the trouble to make the journey would signal contrition before he opened his mouth . . .

On the way Sam conceded that he wasn't going to any trouble, simply paying penance for a bad gaffe. Whatever she had said, Laura must have been hurt and humiliated by the Haunted Ballroom's sequel. Yet she had been brave enough to thrash things out with him, not in malice but for his own good.

And after all that, he'd hurt and humiliated her anew. Incredible!

Ploverbarrow Drive took him aback. Sam had expected a town-center apartment, either a minimalist-decor cave in a new building or one of the Victorian lofts overlooking the canal. The drive was on the edge of Drumwell: smugly suburban, with 1930's vintage detached houses, symbol of the era when breadwinners were almost exclusively male and every neighbor worried over what the neighbors might think.

Under the streetlamps' glow, hushed and self-absorbed Ploverbarrow Drive had a what-sort-of-time-d'you-think-this-is?



ambience. Very late in the proceedings he realized that Laura could have gone off to bed in a huff, leaving him no option but to go straight home again.

No, here was Number 24, roses standing sentry behind the fancy brick garden wall—Laura a gardener, she was transforming by the moment—and her MG was parked in the drive. In residence, then, and still up, thank goodness, for light showed past partly drawn drapes downstairs.

That was the end of the good news for Dr. Samuel Tyler. He rang the bell, he knocked, he heard the muffled babble and laughter of a TV show cease abruptly, but Laura wouldn't come to the door. He knocked harder, and next door a dog started barking. He considered shouting; she had to be a matter of inches away, listening. But he'd been back from Australia long enough to become reinfected by the English dread of Making Scenes.

Moreover, his temper was rising. No anger is more compelling than that seeded by being in the wrong.

Then the downstairs light went out and was replaced within seconds by a dim, better-curtained square of light from an upper room.

Bar suggesting through the letterbox that he take a running jump, Laura's snub could not have been more explicit. The punishment was childish—"Not talking to you, so there!" And undeniably effective, for it made him furious.

Stamping back to the car, he

took his own childish pleasure in slamming the door and taking off with maximum noise. Originally he'd behaved badly—she reckoned—but Laura had pestered and pressured him into resuming a semblance of friendship, only to turn it against him just because he'd got absorbed in his work, lost touch with time. An understandable slip, yet how she was exploiting it! Probably she had waited no more than five minutes back at Tek-Rama this evening. In fact, an ignoble facet of Sam's nature suggested that she had hurried away at the last stroke of six o'clock, avid to put him in the wrong.

Bearing Widow Tollard's insomnia in mind, he parked in a field entry just short of the house instead of ending the futile mission with a bad-tempered rush into the garage, just below her bedroom window. It would do the car no harm to stay outdoors for a night.

Consideration was rewarded, for had Sam driven in, it would have been over the remains of his mountain bike. He'd bought the thing soon after joining Tek-Rama, riding it to and fro. The cycle had been stored in the garden shed behind the garage, awaiting attention to slipping gears. Somebody had thrown it down on the concrete patch fronting the garage. "Kids," Sam snarled; the village had a measure of petty theft and vandalism, which Ma Tollard ascribed to former slum-dwellers rehoused on a council estate a mile away. No



doubt young raiders had discarded tempting loot when they found it impossible to ride. . . .

Clouds parted, and moonlight showed that theft had not been the motive. The bike was a mess, sturdy frame bent, fat tires less slashed than chopped open repeatedly with such force that a sharp edge had nicked the wheel rims. Trampled spokes evoked the ribs of a broken umbrella.

Terrific, all he needed, capstone on his day. A wisp of revulsion twined through his anger: somehow the debris testified to irrational savagery. He carried the bike—it was beyond wheeling—back to the shed, leaning the battered victim against its wall.

"Kids," the widow Tollard grumbled the next morning. "We ought to have a curfew." And when he looked a question, "I was in till nearly nine last night. Only nipped out for half an hour. They must have been watching for me to leave. Your lovely pushbike ruined! What are kiddies doing out that late? Must have happened while I was gone, else I'd have heard them smashing it, little devils. . . . That's it, I shall tell Reg Withy. No use having a friend at court without you make use of them." PC Withy was married to the widow Tollard's niece. Since Withy worked in Force HQ on the far side of the county, Sam doubted whether telling him would do much good, but he kept that thought to himself.

Perhaps the possibility had skulked in Sam Tyler's subcon-

scious from the start. He'd seen TV reruns of *Fatal Attraction*, he knew of similar if milder examples of obsessive behavior, so the soil was ripe for cultivation. When he went to retrieve Ma Tollard's car, Sam Tyler was appalled.

Church Lane residents clubbed together for George Bird, the sexton—he lived next to the vicarage, at the main-road end of the lane—to keep the verges mown. These wide, gentle slopes weren't quite lawns, but they always looked well tended, sprouting crocus and daffodil clumps in spring. Outside the widow Tollard's dwelling the grass was scarred where a small car with wide tires had carved furrows while turning to face the other way. Through anger or haste the driver had not cared about marring the verge. And now that Sam's attention was drawn, he found recent skidmarks on the road surface a few yards short of the scars. Somebody had driven up at speed, braked hard, and, not bothering to turn, back up, turn again, swung round . . . in a car much like Laura Greene's. Which put her refusal to answer the door into a different, nastier context. She hadn't been punishing him, she was too ashamed to show her face.

Hey, that was a movie, warned the skeptic in Sam's brain. And you're not Sherlock Holmes—damage to the verge could have been made by a delivery truck anytime yesterday. Real people, especially real people like Laura, don't do crazily vindictive stuff.

Looked at coolly, it was a wild

theory. Sam wished he could rate it impossible and not just wild. He had stood her up, she had taken it badly, and—wow, what a coincidence—an expensive if neglected piece of his property was destroyed.

Talking to Laura would settle it. If she had blown her top and fled the consequences, something in tone, expression, manner, must give her away.

Confrontation didn't work, for when he went to her office, Laura's PA stated the obvious—she wasn't there. "She had to go to Glasgow last night," said the girl. "She rang me at home this morning to explain. I'm not sure what it's all about, but Ken Loring sent her there at the last moment—she just made the last flight yesterday, the nine thirty P.M."

No, he thought sickly, she told you that, but at nine thirty last night Laura was at her house, and Ploverbarrow Drive is sixteen miles from the airport. Maybe she did call you from Scotland this morning though it was probably from a lot closer than that. Even if she is in Glasgow, then she caught the six A.M. today and was using a phone at the airport there.

"What's the matter, Dr. Tyler?"

"Not a thing," he lied. "Any idea when she'll be back?"

"This evening, she says. She has to be here first thing tomorrow, briefing financial journalists."

Not before she had briefed him, Sam resolved.

The taxi pulled up outside the house with the roses, Laura Greene alighted, and Sam Tyler got out of the widow Tollard's little car, cramped after a two-hour vigil. Laura looked tired, though her suit was neat and her make-up perfect. The overnight bag wasn't large, yet seemed to drag her down.

Whether it was that droop of shoulders or the vulnerability of someone under observation without being aware of it, Sam forgot how painful and embarrassing this was going to be, just as he forgot a much-edited and fully polished speech of don't-bother-denying-it authority ending with firm orders to get professional help and off his back or else.

"I don't care about the bike," he blurted out.

Laura squeaked in shock, dropped the bag and her door keys, and made an admirable recovery. "I'm very glad for you. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Come on, you lost your temper, I wasn't there, you knew it was my bike and you lost control."

"What bike? Are you drunk, Sam?"

"Stop pretending, it's useless. I know you didn't go to Scotland last night. You were here, letting me hammer the door and shaking in your shoes because you thought I'd found my bike—"

"There you go again."

"—and you were so scared or ashamed or whatever, you pretended to be out. I saw the lights



go on and off. You were watching TV when I arrived."

Her mouth opened and shut silently, her eyes focused inwards for a moment. To his amazement she laughed in what he could have sworn was mocking amusement. "Lights and the TV . . . have you ever heard of burglars? Striped jerseys, sacks marked Swag, they have this thing about coming in when people are out. I've spent a small fortune on spoiling it for them. If I'm out at night, lights switch on and off in different rooms, and the TV is on all the time. Ring the bell or knock, it changes volume, then shuts down as if somebody is reacting to the noise."

Shaking her head Laura sighed. "You not only have lousy manners, you can be terribly dim for a great brain."

"You weren't here!" Relief and happiness took Sam unawares.

"Now you're getting the idea." Another momentary blank look as she calculated. "You trekked out here last night . . . serve you right, getting off lightly with just a wasted journey. Look, I seem to have been dashing about forever. Come in, make yourself useful while I change. I'd kill for a cup of tea." Door unlocked, she hurried inside to deal with the burglar alarm. "Kitchen's through there, water in the tap, teabags are hidden away in the jar marked Tea, can you handle that?"

She came downstairs barefoot, wearing jeans and cropped top, hair drawn back. Sam's heart turned over.

"Sappy grins don't work with me," said Laura. "Now, what's this about a bike?"

"Nothing. Rubbish. I was upset, worried."

"Good." She studied him over a mug held in both hands. "Rotten tea, too much milk. I was quite upset, too, sitting around the atrium like a lemon, and even more upset when they wouldn't take calls in the Play-Pen. Really very upset when it got to be half-seven and I'd been in my office for over an hour, pretending to catch up on admin and waiting for you to come dashing in with apologies."

"Won't happen again—"

"Affirmative. You won't get the chance."

"No, listen, I didn't stand you up . . . not that way, deliberately. It was work. That doesn't excuse it, but—"

Relenting, Laura cut in. "I know what you were doing last night. Having a great time droning away with your little chums, and we all know time has no significance in the Play-Pen. That's why I went home with my nose in the air. You really are hopeless."

"God, I'm sorry. Rob Sanders always puts the phones on Out-going-only when things hot up." R&D was out of bounds to the likes of Laura, and the guardian security man at the outer doors was forbidden to tell outsiders who was present—all part of the irksome Need to Know policy. In theory then, he'd been insulated and concealed from her on Thursday evening. "How could you tell where I was?"



Laura raised an eyebrow. "I have my sources." Puzzling him more by teasing, "When you get totally absorbed, you start chewing the end of your tie. Looks ridiculous."

"How d'you kn—"

"Stop changing the subject. I'm still angry with you, this is tea but no sympathy. I have just dog-and-pony-showed at zero notice because my opposite number up north managed to break his leg on the eve of a press conference, and there's more of the same tomorrow—dog-and-pony, not broken legs. This is your agenda: apologize grovelingly but don't take too long about it, then get lost."

Man (or woman) proposes, Eros disposes. They talked, at some point she said she wanted an omelette and he might as well join her now he had imposed himself, they talked some more. Much later that night Laura Greene said goodnight to Sam, warmly if drowsily, before they lay like spoons and fell asleep.

She seemed to take their altered status matter-of-factly in the following days. If Sam tried discussing the future, Laura laughed incredulously or warned against fixing what wasn't broken. Once her attitude would have struck him as frivolous, even evasive, but she had altered Sam Tyler more than he understood; he was resigned to loving somebody not the least like himself. Above all he was happy, and that seemed enough for the moment.

Three weeks later the idyll exploded, literally, when the bomb

went off. The widow Tollard came within nano-seconds of death or mutilation—but Sam Tyler had been the target.

"**Y**ou're trying to place me, think that we've met before," guessed the crinkly-mouthed man. "I drink at the Coach & Horses, that's where it was. Only I believe you people call it the Bun or some such."

"BAP," Sam Tyler corrected dully.

Everything had been askew and inexplicable since the morning of the outrage. He had not set foot in Tek-Rama for four days. There'd been thirty-six hours of questions, questions, and when that was over, much of his time had been spent at Drumwell General Hospital with the widow Tollard. It would've made more sense to stay at Laura's house in Drumwell, but Ma Tollard was fretting about her cat and her garden, both requiring regular attention, so his schedule had been full.

In any case Dr. Tyler was incapable of working. Sustained, rational thinking was beyond him: his mind kept playing the scene where Ma Tollard pushed her egg cup aside and bustled out, saying, "Post's early this morning." Sharp-eared as an owl for the click of the front gate. A greying, bulky woman, wheezing slightly, eager for a high of her humdrum day: even junk mail pleased her . . .

"Brough, Detective-inspector. Archie to my friends, but you can call me inspector."



Having yanked Sam back to the present, the policeman went on, "That's a joke. The idea is to put you at your ease."

Laura Greene spoke tightly. "What are we doing here? What am I doing here at all? You can't think I'd try to hurt Sam, and I was in Scotland when that . . . device was delivered."

"Neither of you is a suspect," Inspector Brough assured her.

"That's what I'm saying. I have a mountain of work, we've made statements already, I could really do without this."

Sitting on a straight chair beside Sam, she sensed adverse reaction and squeezed his hand. "Sorry, darling, you have every right to be shell-shocked, but I'm not involved and one of us has to keep going."

"Well," said Brough, "it's like this." He wasn't an impressive figure, and his manner was cosy. They might have been strangers waiting for a train, with the chaty member of the trio seeking small-talk. "The high-powered chaps have had their dip in the gravy, d'you see—Special Branch because a bomb equals terrorists. The RAF even flew a spook, beg his pardon, agent over from Northern Ireland just to run the rule over the scene and chinwag with the forensics team."

Ignoring that, Laura told Sam, "I'm involved with you, don't get me wrong, but I can't be any use here."

"As I was saying . . ." Brough called her to order. "Turns out it wasn't terrorists after all. Meth-

odology—there's a posh word—wrong, and no political element they could see, Tek-Rama isn't political, meaning defense contracts. Explosives were wrong, too. Not Semtex and not homemade, as a matter of fact the stuff was stolen from a local quarry recently. So it's back to basics, and basics is me."

Although he sighed convincingly, Brough was being disingenuous. He had badgered, maneuvered, and called in favors to work this case.

"I have brought myself up to speed on your statements. Like Miss Greene says, every point has been covered—up to a point." The weak pun gave him innocent pleasure. "I'd like to go back a bit farther, and I'm doing this with both of you, Miss G., because he's your boyfriend and I've seen this again and again, happens to me when I'm yarning away and my wife puts me right or adds details. I do the same when she's gabbing. Frankly, we get on each other's nerves sometimes, but there you are. Let's start last month, doc, with the vandalism of your mountain-bike . . ."

Sam, the faintest scratch of concern abrading the back of his mind, said shortly, "That was children. Hooligans anyway, ask anyone in the village. How on earth d'you know about that, I didn't report it, waste of time."

"Oh, it touched on something else." Brough was vague. "I had asked for anything in a certain area to be sort of flagged up for me, and Mrs. Tollard's nephew



here at HQ mentioned the bicycle business after Auntie put a flea in his ear. Sure it was hooligans, doc?"

"There's a slight difference between smashing my bike and trying to kill me!"

"Only of degree surely? Humor me, let's have all the ins and outs of your bike getting broken." Chatty or no, the inspector was tenacious, and gradually Sam painted the full picture.

Brough chuckled. "So that's how the romance started. Reminds me of courting Mrs. B. I'd always let work come first, and she was not thrilled. Miracle she married me, when I think back."

Laura refused to be charmed. "This is irrelevant. Sam and I are an item, we got together last month. So what?"

"I liked the part where the doc believed he'd got right up your nose, forgetting that date, but all the while you knew he was working in R&D, um, the Play-Pen." Brough tugged at his lower lip, drolly nonplussed. "I had a go-round with Tek-Rama when Mr. Phillips went absent without leave. Never saw inside the Play-Pen, though. Keep Out, This Means You, even for a lot of people working in the same building. But you'd have a pass, Miss G."

"No, and I'm getting on your wavelength, you know I'm not allowed in there." She looked at her watch. "I'd rather you didn't mention this at Tek-Rama, rules are supposed to be rules." And turning to Sam: "I was sure you were still around that evening,

so I had a word with Cyril. You know, the fat Blazer, he's a pet. Asked him to check the Play-Pen cameras, see if you were there."

Addressing Brough again, she admitted, "I shouldn't have done that, Cyril shouldn't have agreed; please don't land him in hot water for being human."

"This security man, Cyril, told you where Dr. Tyler was, then."

"No, I saw for myself, if you must know, and you'll probably pester me until you do. The TV screens are through a door off the lobby with someone operating the cameras. If every camera stayed live, you'd need forty screens. Anyway, Cyril wasn't sure which of the Play-Penners I meant, so we went backstage in Security and he made the other fellow punch up the R&D wing cameras. That's where I saw you eating your tie."

"Something to say, doc?" Brough pounced.

"Nothing." Sam promptly negated that. "I keep telling her all this security fuss is self-defeating. The Play-Pen's supposed to be top secret—Laura flutters her eyelashes and she can spy over our shoulders."

"Now I'm a spy, charming. The cameras in there give a general view, you couldn't read documents or instruments. And Cyril only gave me a quick peep, enough to confirm you were there."

"Don't fall out," the inspector pleaded. "Cyril's secret is safe with me, miss. And the other accomplice, the cameras chap. While we're dotting i's, which security man was that?"



"Can't remember, does it matter? Bob or Frank, probably, they tend to work nights." Her eyes narrowed. "You are going to tell on them, how petty."

"Perish the thought. You said it, they were just being human." Brough pondered briefly. "Very well, I needn't keep you any longer. Jointly, that is. Doc, I want you to go with the sergeant here and talk to her about enemies. Yours, of course, the sergeant's far too nice a gel to have any."

The nice gel sent Laura a glance inviting sympathy at working for this oaf and opened the door for Sam.

"I went through all that right afterwards," he protested. "Can't you take it aboard, I don't have enemies."

Inspector Brough's geniality disappeared. "You've gone through it once, and now you can do it again. Mrs. Tollard needs skin grafts on her legs, her hearing is permanently affected, her life has changed for the worse. I reckon you owe her."

Shaken, Sam countered, "Some psycho planted a bomb at random or got the wrong address."

"Dream on, doc. The brown paper round the package finished up as charred confetti but forensics still made out -e-r and the start of those initials after your name on a scrap the size of a postage stamp. The house number on another. It was for you, have no illusions on that score, my friend."

"That was a rotten thing to say," Laura accused him when the

C.I.D. woman had led Sam Tyler away.

"The truth that wounds, my dad used to say. Methodist minister, never drank or smoked." Brough resumed his cosy style. "I'm not insensitive, Laura—look how I got rid of your boyfriend before going into delicate matters."

"Oh yes?"

"It's quite serious between you and Dr. Tyler. And a departure from your norm, as I understand."

"Meaning?"

"Just that you don't mix business and pleasure, your friends say. Popular, friendly—what you are paid for in public relations—but no romances at work."

"You've been pumping colleagues for gossip about me?"

"Not half. About you, the doc, the office boy, not that they have office boys these days." Brough was unruffled. "No need to get on your high horse, your friends think you and the doc make a handsome couple."

"This is ridiculous."

"Come to think of it, keeping social life separate isn't your norm," Brough pondered aloud. "Mr. Phillips, Mick Phillips in marketing, the pair of you were quite close for a while."

"That's . . . it wasn't the way you make it sound." Laura couldn't help lowering her voice and glancing at the recently tenanted chair beside her. "Mick and I—he's the same with everyone, charm full blast, arm round the shoulders, spraying out 'darlings' like oldtime actors used to."

"Rather more to it than that."



Damn the man! "Not much, inspector. If you want norms, one rule I never break concerns married men. But . . . Mick was away a long time, running the North American end. He came back alone, that was two years ago, saying he and Trish were separated, a divorce in the works."

"And you believed him," Brough sympathized.

"I didn't care one way or the other. If he wanted to buy me dinner, whisk me up to London for premieres and so forth, great. Mick's such a cliché stud he was due a lesson. He didn't get what he wanted, and just as well. Trish, poor woman, came home once the American school term finished and she could bring the boys. The famous separation was science fiction, another of his bedtime stories. Only it didn't get me into bed or anywhere near."

Brough's disappointment perplexed her. Misunderstanding its cause, she said, "I can't prove we didn't sleep together, not until Mick surfaces again, and even then he might lie to protect his vanity, but it happens to be true."

"Oh, I believe you. So that was it, you led him a chase, then thumbed your nose? How did Phillips take it? Laugh and a pat on the bottom, call you a wicked minx?" The policeman's manner hardened. "Miss Greene, if I want titillation there are plenty of blue films on video. Please be straight with me."

"Okay, straight it is. Mick isn't a good loser, and he hated being taken for a ride."

"You fell out, in other words." Inspector Brough was recovering his spirits.

"If you mean Mick became a pain, then yes. He kept dropping meaning remarks in front of people, implying we'd had sex. But not directly enough for me to call him on it. . . . As if that wasn't enough, he started pestering me on the phone at home, I had to get an unlisted number. So he'd phone me office-to-office at work, which is where he came unstuck. I conned him that security had taped one of his tirades, I had a copy, and if he didn't leave me alone, I would take him to an industrial tribunal for harassment. That did the trick."

"I daresay it did. Was there a tape?"

"Shouldn't think so, it's the R&D side they monitor. But my phone was sounding weird at the time, clicks and an echo during some calls, which gave me the idea."

Brough nodded meditatively. "Mr. Phillips acted up, you fought back—and he vamoosed."

"I didn't drive him out! Anyway, Mick will be back. Now and then the tomcat side triumphs, that's all. He'll show up when the latest woman gets wise to him, and Trish, bless her, will forgive him. Whether Tek-Rama will is another kettle of fish. Has this anything remotely to do with that awful bomb?"

"I've got a grasshopper mind," Brough said blandly. "One final hop and you're free to catch up on your workload. Doc Tyler was



moaning about security at Tek-Rama and said something sarky about batting your eyelashes to get a look at the Play-Pen. Is it really that easy? I won't get Fat Fred or whatever your mate's name is into bother, I'm just curious."

"What difference does it make, how—" Laura frowned at her watch. "I suppose you'll keep me here all day if I don't Confess All. It's all so silly. . . . Look, don't think security is slack, but I have always been pleasant to the Blazers, unlike most of my colleagues. Makes me their blue-eyed girl. I got Cyril to persuade the man on cameras to give me a peek by making a joke of it—said Sam had stood me up and if he'd just lost track of time, was in the Play-Pen, I'd only throttle him, but if he had sneaked out on another date I would hang, draw, and quarter him."

Inspector Brough looked at her. "A joke," she repeated wearily, "kidding my way in for a look at the surveillance screens."

Brough seemed to have lost interest in the subject. "I'm sure, miss. Thanks for your help, I'll walk you to your car." He insisted on doing it, talking rubbish every step of the way. He was up to something, and she couldn't imagine what it might be.

She would have been even more baffled and upset had she realized that mentally the policeman was rubbing his hands over achieving progress.

In conference with Inspector

Brough, the Assistant Chief Constable (Operations) accused, "You are obsessed with security men at that company, Archie." Elwyn Keyes, the ACC, always acted as devil's advocate, so the inspector was undismayed.

"Security! When Phillips vanished, Tek-Rama virtually told me to mind my own business, they wanted the matter swept under the carpet. If his wife hadn't got drunker than usual and reported him missing, we'd still know nothing about it."

Keyes had a rich wife and knew his way around the financial pages. "You can't blame them for being discreet. Tek-Rama shares dipped twenty pence recently on a rumor that they'd suffered fresh leaks, and the price stayed down awhile even though it was a false alarm. Of course they weren't going to shout it from the housetops when an executive deserted and information went missing."

"Missing? Michael Phillips is dead, sir. Being well in with Mrs. P. these days, I know he hasn't drawn a penny from their joint account since his disappearance. Same goes for his credit cards. And he was a rotten husband but adored his kids. He might steer clear of his wife, but he'd at least phone the boys. Hasn't happened."

"Suggestive," Keyes agreed. "Granted, you have a sighting on the evening before Phillips went off the map—"

"With a man wearing a blue blazer." Brough spread his hands.



"Can't pretend my witness would do well in court. He's on a train the night Phillips went absent, it stops momentarily on an embankment overlooking back gardens of houses nearby. He sees two men out on a patio brawling. One in a blazer my witness insists was Tek-Rama uniform. He owns a dry cleaners, handles those blazers regularly, several security fellows are regular customers, he says the cut and style are distinctive, for what that's worth."

"He sold you on something seen in twilight, for seconds, at a distance."

"That's why he would be hopeless in court. But it was Phillips' house, it was the night he went missing—informant had a lottery win the same night, pinpointing day and date—and Mrs. Phillips and her sons were away visiting relatives, so Phillips was alone with Mr. Blazer."

"I'm up to speed on that, thanks." The assistant chief had a lunch appointment. "What throws me is this intuitive leap: months ago Phillips went absent in arguably suspicious circumstances, a company security man could be involved maybe-perhaps. Therefore, the same man's a suspect in the bomb attempt on Dr. Tyler."

Inspector Brough was laconic. "Links. Tyler and the Phillipses were friendly. But that's not it. I've established another cross-reference—Laura Greene. She played Phillips along, he took it badly. Then she started associating with Doc Tyler. Bear with me a second, sir. Consider the se-

quence . . . Mick Phillips gives Laura a hard time and gets knocked off the board. Doc Tyler insults her by forgetting their date, and his bike gets smashed. Then he and Ms. Greene commence a hot-'n'-heavy affair, and next thing, he's nearly killed."

"Selective assembly of events," Keyes argued. "There's a difference between damaging Tyler's property and sending him a bomb."

"Difference of degree, not nature. Initially he got a rap over the knuckles. Sex with her earned far tougher punishment. Whether she knows it or not—not, in my view—Laura Greene has a stalker at Tek-Rama. A secret admirer, sees himself as a guardian angel. Anyone treats her badly, look out! A jealous admirer, violent with it, and if she gets close to anyone, Mr. Blazer deals with them. Workmates at any rate because they're the only ones he can snoop on."

Walking round Keyes' desk, Brough arranged photocopied sheets in front of him. "It was like drawing teeth, but I won in the end. These are duty rosters. Those for the period when Phillips went missing have been shredded, more's the pity, but I bet they follow the same pattern. Night the doc's bike was smashed, security men on duty in the Tek-Rama lobby were Cyril Huntley, Donald Neith, and Gavin McDonald. All ex-army, by the way. Neith and McDonald were in the Royal Engineers, and both had demolition training, know about explosives.



"On bike night as we'll call it, their shift finished at seven thirty P.M. Plenty of time to get to Tyler's lodgings for a spot of sabotage. The same trio shared a shift the night before the bomb was left on his doorstep. Two of these guys are loners, considered a bit weird by their mates. Nothing extreme—Don Neith's a conspiracy freak, turns every conversation into Who Shot JFK or UFO's Have Landed. McDonald lives all on his own in a big house inherited from his parents. He is mad-keen on birdwatching, stays out all night observing and recording owls, talks his head off about it next day."

"Prime suspect, huh?" Belying the sarcasm, Keyes was intrigued. Yet he shook his head regretfully. "Hang on, if your jealous man had a down on Phillips for hassling Laura Greene, surely he ought to have been delighted when Dr. Tyler appeared to stand her up?"

"I believe any man involved with her is in a no-win situation. Damned if they get anywhere with her, or seem to, and damned if they're offhand with her, which covers young Tyler's conduct."

Keyes groaned theatrically. "Talk about having your cake and eating it, you change the rules as soon as they get in the way of theory. More gently, it's all supposition."

"True. On the other hand, it's worth following up. Special Branch and all the king's horses and all the king's men have failed to produce a whiff of a suspect or

motive. For why? They started too recently, this is an escalating situation dating back months."

Gathering gloves and uniform cap, Keyes grunted, "Good luck. How do you propose to follow it up? Word to the wise, Archie—our Boss of Bosses has been got at by two local members of Parliament on Tek-Rama's behalf. The Loring brothers have influence, they are terrified of scandal. Crash in there interviewing staff without good reason, and we'll both be in trouble." The assistant chief smiled thinly. "Hurt you more than it will me, savvy?"

"Me, crash in?" Inspector Brough was genuinely hurt. "No, I was thinking in terms of simultaneous visits to Huntley, Neith, and McDonald's homes. Mr. Blazer believes nobody suspects him—my money is on bomb-making gear or its traces being there for the finding."

"Search warrants," Keyes thought aloud. "Three warrants, what's more, and no real grounds for them . . ."

Brough said piously, "Thank heaven for Attila the Magistrate. Just back from holidays in sunny Spain, should be in a giving mood."

The magistrate in question was a police wannabe doomed by astigmatism and modest height to run his family's farm supplies empire.

"He'll sign warrants to search the bishop's palace and half the cathedral close if I ask nicely."

"You," Detective-sergeant Bea



Zetland accused, "are so devious you'll bump into yourself coming back one of these days."

"Harsh," said Inspector Brough.

"I don't mind," Sergeant Zetland continued, though plainly she did, "only here I am at the sharp end, and you might have the courtesy to admit it." They were parked outside a Victorian house, garden unkempt, frontage stained by green slime and rust tracks from long-broken rainwater pipes.

"How d'you make that out? Three security men, three warrants, three raids on different locations. I picked assignments at random."

"Random my foot." Ms. Zetland, as substantial as she was pretty, heaved round in the car seat to look him in the eye. "You conned Skeleton Keyes into giving the nod to a fishing expedition, but you've had one suspect in mind all along. The rest is just hedging your bets."

"You know me so well." Brough sighed in false admiration. "Cyril Huntley is ex-army like the others, but Catering Corps; generals swooned over his custard. Not mechanically gifted, Fat Cyril has problems putting batteries in a torch. Don Neith, on the other hand, is a real dot on the card. Royal Engineers and, better yet, he was attached to Special Forces, just the man for making a bomb."

"We're not raiding Neith," Sergeant Zetland observed sourly.

"Well, if he built a booby-trap device, I'd expect it to be more so-

phisticated and not go off before it was meant to. Don's good with his hands; he's a security man, but maintenance chaps at Tek-Rama come to him for advice. More to the point, Neith's in a stable relationship and his partner is another man. Can't see ex-Corporal Neith getting het up over La Greene's amours . . ."

Bea Zetland nodded glumly. "Thanks, Archie. You've consulted Mystic Meg, shuffled the tarot cards, and picked Gavin McDonald for the bomber. If this wasn't another of your crystal ball jobs, probably nothing in it, I would be seriously scared. We're talking about a nutter with stolen explosives, and he hasn't used half his stock yet. I hate bombs. You can't kneel an explosion in the groin."

"Insubordinate and violent, what a paragon."

"Sue me, boss. Don't start with the womanly intuition stuff, but I've got an iffy feeling about this." She managed a pallid grin. "Come on, let's do it before I change my mind."

"No hurry, let McDonald simmer another minute. He's watching us, that curtain upstairs moved all on its own when we arrived."

Brough's expression changed with his mood. "We've had a giggle, but playtime's over: stay in the car. Roll the windows down in case of blast, and soon as that front door opens, watch our man like a hawk."

The car rocked as she scrambled out. "Get lost—I'm nervous, not yellow."



Brough debated inwardly; he could pull rank and he wanted to, but she'd never forgive him, however things turned out. Further, he had expected no other response. She was a sound, strong copper. He padded after her to the house.

The doorbell was broken, but the knocker, stiff enough to suggest infrequent use, set echoes rattling. They heard Gavin McDonald thudding down uncarpeted stairs before the door opened a wary three inches or so. "Yes?"

Brough displayed his warrant card. "Just a few words, Gavin, a friendly chat and a guided tour of the premises." Despite or because of his cheeriness, the door stayed abruptly shut.

Craning around its edge, Inspector Brough laughed abruptly.

"No wonder you've never invited Laura back for a coffee. This place is a tip, needs a woman's touch—"

Sergeant Zetland started kicking at it after the door slammed in their faces, but abruptly urgent, Brough hustled her away. "Get back, he may—"

Suddenly the world went an impossible white, swallowing him in an aching vacuum. Searing air filled his lungs, after which, nothing.

Bea Zetland, face freckled with healing cuts, had got off lighter. Doctors had assured her that the damage was superficial enough to leave no scars.

"Lot's wife." Inspector Brough

greeted her hoarsely and louder than intended, for he was still partly deaf. When her eyebrows rose, he explained, "Read your Bible, she was like you, looked back and regretted it."

"Ha bloody ha. How's the leg, boss?"

"Itchy. Sign the cast before you go, everyone else has. No rude messages, Mrs. B.'s old fashioned, gets touchy about that sort of thing."

He struggled upright in the hospital bed. "Any luck yet with McDonald's house?"

"Former house, now a heap of rubble. Sorry, mustn't talk shop with you, doctor's orders." But having sat down gingerly—not only her face was abraded—she relented. "The cellar is still intact. Hidden away behind a secret door, but that was wasted effort after the bulldozer sliced the top off his hidey-hole when they started clearing debris. Now we've got McDonald's diary, only it's more of a logbook crossed with a photo album.

"Deeply crazy, that one. Blowing the place up was part of the master plan. All down in his insane book. If the police got on to him, he'd escape. By killing himself. No thanks to him we aren't dead as well."

"Photo album?" Brough croaked.

"Pictures of Laura Greene taken with a long lens. That was what the birdwatching at night was all about, staking out her place and putting her on *Candid Camera*." A brief silence before Sergeant Zetland complained, "Don't think



much of these grapes, tell whoever brings them to get seedless next time."

"I'll make a point of it. The diary, it was the way I'd worked out?"

"Pretty much," Bea Zetland admitted grudgingly. "More guesswork than deduction if you ask me. McDonald was besotted with Laura Greene, saw himself as father, big brother, and moral guardian combined. Sexual motive in there somewhere, must have been, but he didn't want to, you know, get it on with her. He spied on her constantly. That monitor system on phones at Tek-Rama? McDonald rigged it so her phone was permanently wired to a voice-activated recorder of his own tucked behind the legit setup. That's how he got onto Mick Phillips' nuisance calls. He went to Phillips' house, white knight telling the dragon to quit it. Phillips blustered, said McDonald was just a wage-slave who was exceeding his duty, threatened to have him fired."

"Unwise."

"Suicidal," Sergeant Zetland snorted. "McDonald was hell-bent on staying near Laura, so sacking was unacceptable. Goodbye, Phillips, he's buried somewhere up on the moors. Lots of gardening practice for the lads, 'cause the diary places the grave 'near Brecken Tor' and that's a lot of moorland."

"Doc Tyler, what about him in this diary?"

"Laura made a song and dance over getting stood up when she

talked her way into the monitoring suite that night. Gavin McDonald was on the screens and took her seriously.

"Being security, he had access to staff addresses, and as soon as his shift finished, it was off to the doc's digs, smash up the bike to punish him for insulting the great lady. It was Tyler he wanted to damage, but he was afraid of being spotted if he hung around too long, and settled for next best . . ."

The sergeant shuddered, not wholly in mimed repulsion.

"Makes your flesh creep, that bloody book of his. Lot of agonizing over just how much punishment Sam Tyler was due for insulting McDonald's goddess.

"He kept on staking out her house for his happy-snaps, which is how he twigged that she'd forgiven Dr. Tyler. Lots of forgiveness, night after night, Sam leaving first thing next morning. So he had to be got rid of. Supreme crime, sleeping with Laura. McDonald didn't want her, not that way, but he was bloody determined that nobody else would." Abstractedly Sergeant Zetland peeled and dealt with the last banana in her superior officer's bedside basket. "I've tol' Laura," she continued indistinctly, "she could do a lot worse than Sam. Good prospects, daft about her, and he knows his place, not heavy-husband material. Says he'll stay at Tek-Rama if she makes a commitment. Laura's gun-shy over getting wed, but I wouldn't mind being a bridesmaid, I can be girlie



and traditional with the best of 'em."

Secretly diverted by her wistfulness, Brough remained poker-faced.

"Bridesmaid? Since when have you been Laura Greene's best friend?"

"Don't get sarky or I'll sit on your bad leg. Laura came round to see me when I was in dock—you couldn't be visited right afterwards—and we hit it off." Her voice tailed away on realizing that she was talking to herself.

Having closed his eyes for a perceived moment, Inspector Brough surfaced to darkness and an empty room. He concluded that he'd slept for several hours. Some-

body had tidied his surroundings and removed the remains of the sergeant's picnic.

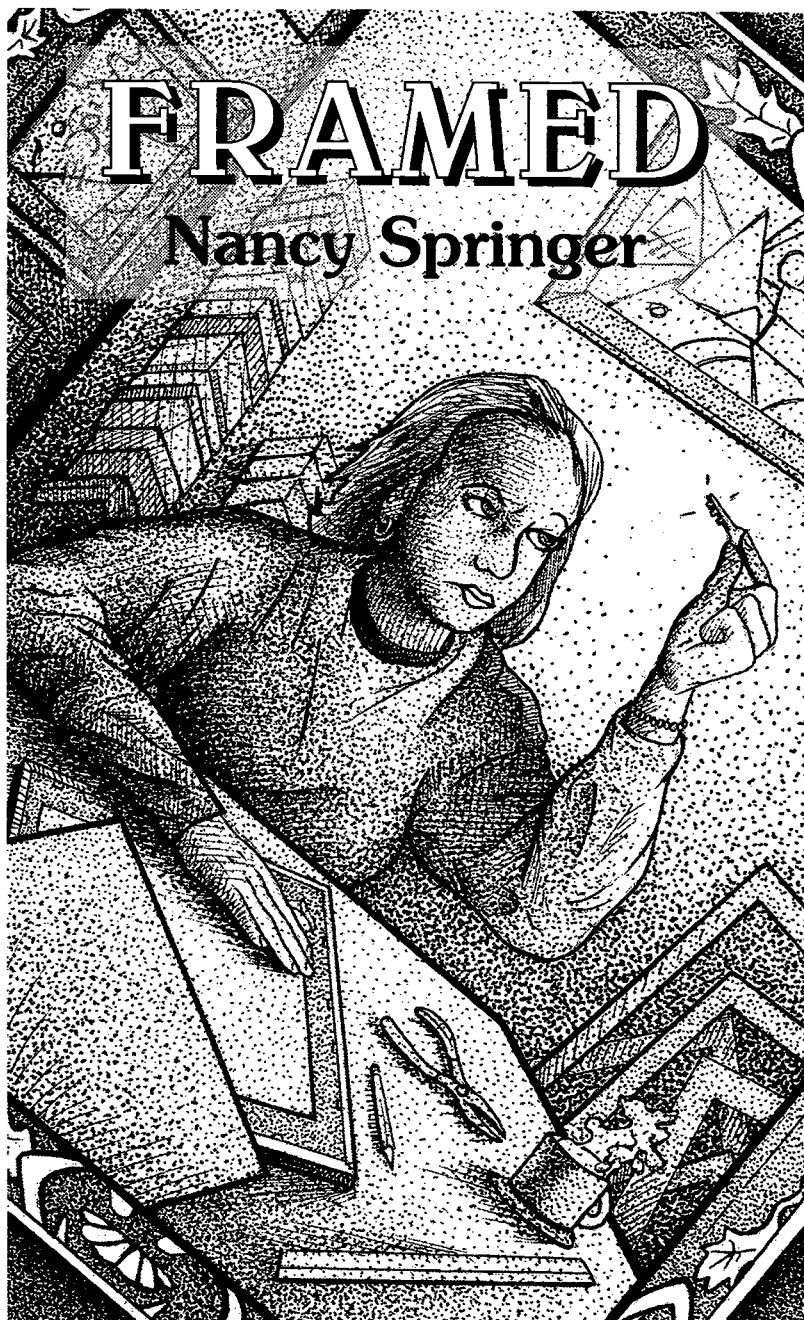
Diverting, the image of Zetland's wedding appearance. He tried to picture her decked out in pastel frock with shoes dyed to match, bridesmaid's bouquet carried like a blackjack. Easier to imagine the sergeant marching Sam Tyler to the preacher with a muttered homile about being caught bang to rights, now make it easy on yourself, speak up and give the right answers . . .

Sliding back into sedated slumber, it occurred to the inspector that Mrs. Brough enjoyed weddings. As soon as he was fit, he'd start angling for an invitation.

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FRAMED

Nancy Springer



Expecting nothing but the creative pleasure of a re-frame job, Veronica ripped the brown paper off the back, wadded it, and lobbed it into the trash. Reaching for the pliers to pull the brads she asked, "So you think this guy's had a sex change or something, Lois?"

"Who knows?" Putting on her coat to leave, the boss rolled her eyes. "His phone's a wrong number, they returned the postcard I sent him, maybe he's deep-sixed with Jimmy Hoffa. Who knows what goes on with customers? Look at the art they bring in. Look at the mats they put on it."

"I'll say." Puce and fuchsia on a lithograph; what was somebody smoking?

"Another cowsy-wowsy print. Mat it up nice and some schmo will buy it."

"I'll do my best." Veronica pulled the last brad and lifted out the backing.

"Well, I'm outa here. See ya, Ronnie."

"See ya," Veronica echoed automatically, staring at the strange little parcel she had just uncovered. Or not strange, exactly, but quite out of place, taped to the back of the fuchsia mat. Why would somebody sandwich a key inside a frame job?

A key in a clear plastic bag. Ronnie pulled the packet loose and looked at it more closely. Looked like some sort of locker key. And a business card. With one stubby, callused finger she coaxed the card out of the bag and read it: GROAT'S MINI-STOR-

AGE. And scrawled in Bic pen the number 129. "Huh!" she said.

"What's that?" Tim, the other framer on the evening shift, had just come in. Veronica showed him her find. It was good for a lot of joking and speculation over the next four hours, during which she reframed the lithograph in a really classy cream black-core mat with V-groove.

"Groat's Mini-Storage. Isn't that where they had an Elvis sighting or something?"

"I doubt it," Ronnie said. "It's down near where I live."

"Well, it was in the news for some reason. I can't remember. Clinton did it with some woman there? Princess Di's ghost?"

When it got near time to close, Ronnie said, "I'm just going to drop the key off."

"Sure."

That night? Why not; it wasn't like there was anybody waiting for her at home. Since the divorce, the less time she spent at home, the better. It felt good to walk into Groat's 24-Hour Convenience Store. Lights. People. She asked the man behind the counter, "You're under the same management as the mini-storage out back, right?"

"Right. You want to rent a unit?"

"No. I found a key." She laid it on the counter in front of him. Leaning on his plump forearms he stared at it but did not touch it. He had eyes like a dead fish, expressionless.

"Where'd you find it?" he asked.

"Inside a framed picture of all places."

"How'd you do that?"

She explained briefly. She had no clue why he wanted to know, and for sure he wasn't her type, but talking with him was better than going home.

"One twenty-nine," he said meditatively after a short silence. "That's a claimer unit."

"Huh?"

"Nobody's been paying the rent. You got the key. Whatever's there, take it. It's yours." He shoved the key at her, still in its bag.

"You serious?"

"Yep. Yours." He looked at her with those fish-flat eyes. "Go take a look."

She gawked a moment, then took the key and headed out to see for herself. Veronica Phillips could use a windfall as much as most people. More than some. Bluejean jobs like framing don't pay much. But she'd reached a point in her life where, even if it meant working for minimum wage, she wasn't willing to walk the walk and talk the talk any longer. No more lipstick. No more pantyhose.

And if someone wanted to give her the contents of a mini-storage free, why not?

It was lighted well enough down there that she did not feel frightened. One twenty-nine was only halfway down the hill anyway. She spotted the number about the same time she heard the sirens approaching.

The key fit the lock okay.

Guinea-pig siren noises, *woot woot woot*, and then something with flashing lights pulled into

the convenience store parking lot. Ronnie glanced up. Cop car.

What now? Was somebody trying to rob the place? She'd stay until she was sure it was safe to go up there. With a click she pulled open the door of 129.

Empty.

She stood there a moment to be sure the shadows in the corners weren't fooling her. But it was. Empty. Ronnie clenched her teeth, mentally framing a thing or two to say to that fish-eyed man.

"Police officer," said a male voice behind her. "Turn around slowly and keep your hands where I can see them."

About that time Veronica remembered why Groat's Mini-Storage had been in the news months back. It was the place where they'd found the body.

"Tell it to me one more time," said the police detective, looking bored.

"Why? It's way past my bedtime." Ronnie tried to speak pleasantly even though her head ached with stress and fatigue. It had to be three A.M.

It had been a woman's body, she remembered. The cops wouldn't tell her a thing, but it seemed to her it had been a woman's body jammed into a footlocker in the mini-storage. Unknown female, sawed in pieces.

"Because I'm asking you nicely," said the detective not very nicely. Llewellyn, his nametag said. He *was* her type, damn it, lean and dark, but he was too young; he wouldn't be interested

in her. Anyway, she didn't like his attitude. "Start at the top."

"No." Ronnie found that she had had enough. "You want to stay here all night, fine, we'll stay here all night, but I'm calling a lawyer."

It was the smell that had given it away. The fish-eyed man probably wouldn't have bothered with the contents of 129 for a few more months if it hadn't been for the stench. Just like the frame shop hadn't bothered with the dead-beat order until months past the six-week deadline.

"You'll have to wait till morning for that," said Detective Llewellyn. With a name like that it was no wonder he had to act tough. "I can put you in a cell if you like."

"Oh, for God's sake," Ronnie cried, her voice breaking, "if you won't let me go, tell me what it is I'm supposed to have done. Just tell me what you think I did!"

He wouldn't, of course. What was driving Veronica toward the edge was the way none of them would tell her anything. But he did leave her alone for a while. When he came back, he carried papers. "Okay," he said, still bored, "just read over this transcript of your statement, sign it, and you can go. For now."

The transcript was accurate enough. While she read it, Detective Llewellyn diddled with papers on his desk, his hands irritated, jumpy. But as she signed, she saw his hands freeze like rabbits. She looked up; he was staring at her hand holding the pen, definitely not bored any longer.

"How'd you get that callus on your little finger?" he asked.

"Huh?" She put down the pen and looked at the rough patch on the outside of her pinkie, right at the first joint. "Pulling the wire taut."

"Wire? What wire?"

"Picture framing."

"And you get a lot of little cuts doing that?"

"Oh yeah." She had bandages on two fingers right now and half-healed glass cuts on her knuckles.

"And you keep your fingernails short."

"Yeah. Have to." She had never liked those acrylic claws anyway. "Why?"

"Nothing. No reason. Just curious." Llewellyn stood up, dismissing her. "I'll be calling on you again. Don't leave the area or you really will need a lawyer."

"Is that a threat?"

"Ma'am, that's a promise."

Ronnie hated it when anyone called her ma'am, it made her feel so old. And what was all that rigamarole about her callus and her cuts and her fingernails?

It came to her intuitively when she was in bed, finally, trying to go to sleep but too wired to relax, thinking about what she should have done . . . what she should've said . . . oh, damn it all, what should she do now? Her mind was going like a hamster in a wheel, and dreams were trying to break in; the result was almost like hallucination. That woman's body. Still unidentified. In pieces. Head, dead. Decomposed. Hands. With

a callus just in that place. Little cuts. Short nails.

She sat straight up in bed. Of course, her mind tried to tell her, she didn't know anything for certain. The cop could have been thinking about something else entirely. Some other case. Some show he saw on TV. But instinctively she knew better. She felt sure to her core.

"A framer," she whispered. "The dead woman was a framer."

It was no use even trying to sleep after that.

The next day when Ronnie walked into the shop Lois dropped all her paperwork and hugged her.

"Ron," she wailed, "for God's sake, why didn't you just put the damn key in the lost and found?"

"The cop was here?"

"Yes. That dead woman in the mini-storage—"

"I know."

"He thinks she was a framer."

"Yeah. So now I know how it feels to be framed," Ronnie said. She'd never thought much about that expression, but now she understood in her bones what it meant: to be put in a false context that looked true, a picture complete with spotlight. "Everything's pointing at me, and I don't know why."

"That detective is cute!" called a blonde framer named Tiffany.

"Too much attitude," Ronnie told her.

"I like 'em with 'tude!"

"Did he beat you with a rubber hose?" Tim asked helpfully.

"Ooooh!" Tiffany cooed. "Did he? Please say he did!"

"Stop it, guys," Lois ordered, still hugging Ronnie. "We've got to find out who originally framed that litho."

It should've been simple. The order was still in the computer. The paperwork was still in the bin. But nobody had signed off on it, and nobody had entered it in the log.

"Ronnie, do you remember, did anybody sign the back?"

"Crud. I didn't notice." And the brown paper had gone with the trash. Ronnie was feeling increasingly annoyed. No, face it: increasingly scared. "Lois. Did whatsisname, the detective—did he seem to think that I, you know, that I'm mixed up in—you know, the dead woman?"

"Honey, like he'd tell me?"

"Well, dammit, isn't he going to look for the guy who ordered the thing, the deadbeat? What's his name, Tedder?"

"Horace Tedder. Yeah, I guess. He was asking about him."

With angst that echoed Ronnie's Tim said, "You'd think I'd remember a guy who ordered puce and fuchsia mats." According to the initials on the order, Tim had taken it.

Ronnie knew how hard it was to remember yesterday's orders, let alone one taken six months ago. Nevertheless she bleated, "You don't remember a thing?"

"No. I don't even remember the litho."

"Who else was working then? Lois, do you still have the old work schedules?"

Lois grumbled, "It's a good thing I save everything." She rooted in the back of a file drawer and eventually pulled the schedule for the day the Tedder order was taken. "You." Oh, goody. Detective Llewellyn was going to eat that up when he got around to asking, which he would. "Tim. Tiffany. And Melinda."

Melinda was the only one Ronnie didn't know very well. Melinda hadn't lasted very long.

"Do you ever hear from Melinda?"

"No. But why would I?" Some people were like that, and Melinda was one of them. One day she just hadn't shown up for work, and nobody was surprised. Ronnie remembered Melinda's saying that she had held jobs as a road construction flagger, a masseuse, a telemarketer, a nail tech, a cookie factory line feeder, a horse groomer, and an exotic dancer. Not the stay-with-it sort.

"Did she pick up her last paycheck?"

"No. It's still sitting—" Lois broke off and stared at Ronnie. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm not sure."

"The check doesn't amount to much. She probably just blew it off." Lois turned to the Rolodex, pulled a number, and jabbed the phone. After a moment, with a taut look on her face, she set it down. "Number's disconnected," she said.

Silence.

"I wish I had money to call a lawyer," Ronnie said.

Lois gave her a thoughtful look.

"Honey, let's you and me take the day off and go bar hopping."

They made a disreputable pair in T-shirts and jeans mottled with frame stains; put walnut and mahogany and cherry all together and it looks like dog doo, that's all. About the same color as Lois's old Saab. "You don't need to worry about a lawyer yet," Lois said, sounding not quite sure as she chugged the Saab out of the parking lot. "If they really thought you did anything, they wouldn't have let you go."

Ronnie knew better. They just needed evidence to hold her, that was all. They wanted to wrap this thing up. "How much does a lawyer cost?"

Too much. They talked about money, about how people got by, Tim and his child support payments, Tiffany and her kids and their asthma medication. Bar hopping meant looking for Melinda; they checked her apartment first. None of the mailboxes was tagged with her name. Lois pushed buzzers at random until she found a tenant at home. Melinda had skipped, he said.

"If you find her," he shouted over the intercom, "tell her to come get her stuff. It's still in the basement."

They found the basement stairs, went down, and looked at Melinda's worldly goods through the bars of the storage cage. At good washable-silk dresses thrown in there still on their hangers. At Melinda's jewelry box teetering on top of the pile.

"I've got a really sick feeling about this," Ronnie said as they got back into the Saab.

Lois nodded. "I know."

"Should we go to the cops?"

"Nuh-uh. Let them figure it out. I'm not going to look at a dead person. In pieces."

They checked a couple of the bars where Melinda hung out, just in case. Nobody had seen her. She had so many boyfriends that no particular one of them was looking for her.

"Dead end," Ronnie said, then shuddered as she realized what she had said.

"Yeah."

"Let's try looking for whatsis-name, the Tedder guy."

They drove to the address, and it wasn't there.

A nice old neighborhood, and the house number just wasn't there. They drove up and down the block twice, looking, and finally pulled over and asked a woman collecting her mail at the curb where Horace Tedder lived.

"Who?"

"That name, Horace, he sounds like an old guy," Ronnie suggested. No go. They drove away, silent. "Maybe Tim typoed the address?" Ronnie ventured.

Lois snorted. She had a very expressive snort.

"What now?"

"Dead end."

"No, not quite." Mentally Ronnie grasped for the last straw. "The artist."

"Huh?"

"The artist. Do they keep records of who buys things?"

"I dunno."

"He might have. It's a signed limited edition."

Lois sat bolt upright behind the steering wheel. "That dinky litho is a signed limited edition?"

"Yeah. The numbers, the rag paper, the whole routine. Which is another weird thing, why did someone slap plain paper mats on it?"

Lois subsided against her wooden-bead seat pad. "Tim took the order."

"But Tim would never ever have done that. And if the guy was too cheap to spring for acid-free mats, Tim would remember."

Lois took a long breath and let it out with eyes elevated heavenward.

Ronnie said, "Somebody hides a key inside a job for a guy with no address who puts puce and fuchsia paper mats on a signed limited edition—"

"Hey! Maybe the artist found out about the mats and killed him. Just joking," Lois added hastily. "Just joking."

Few artists had actual studios in Ronnie's experience, but this one did. Or almost. The tasteful wooden sign said STUDIO GOROG, but really the place was a sales gallery. In a remodeled schoolhouse, bell and all. How very quaint. How very locked up and closed. SHOWINGS BY APPOINTMENT ONLY, said a placard on the door.

"Jeez. Well, excuuuse us." Shading her eyes, Ronnie peered in through a schoolhouse window.

"Jeez," she said again, louder, for displayed in the window was a litho identical to the one she had framed, with a hand-calligraphy price tag: one thousand dollars.

"A thousand bucks!"

"Huh?" Lois came over, looked, and said, "Holy catalpas. I was going to put it out for thirty-nine ninety-five with frame."

"Who on earth would pay that much for a—"

"For that piece of garbage!"

"—for a litho of a barn and some cows?"

"Around here? Nobody! He's got himself priced right out of the local market."

"This whole place advertises For Snots Only," Ronnie complained. "Do you think he'd let us in if he were here?" Lois rolled her eyes and copied the phone number on the door placard.

On the way back to the car Ronnie said, "And I always wondered how artists made a living."

"Most of them don't."

"Maybe it's like the kid with the lemonade stand, a thousand bucks a cup. All he has to do is sell one."

Lois shook her head and headed the Saab toward the frame shop.

Ronnie said, "And this Tedder guy paid that kind of bucks? And put puce and fuchsia mats on it and didn't pick up the order and has a false address?"

"And you think he's old from his name but those are definitely not old-person colors."

"So why should anything make sense?"

When they walked into the shop, there sat Detective Llewellyn in the swivel chair at Lois's desk, waiting to take Ronnie in for more questioning.

She handed the photo back to Llewellyn, feeling a bit sick.

"Yeah, it's her. Melinda."

He settled back into his desk chair, watching Ronnie with no expression.

"How well did you know her?"

"Not very well. Listen, can I make a couple of phone calls?"

"You're entitled to one."

"Not to a lawyer. If I can just talk to a few people, I think I can clear this whole thing up."

"No. That's my job."

"But—"

"Tell me about this Doerfler woman."

Melinda, he meant. Melinda Doerfler. Ronnie said, "I only knew her to work with her. But I got the impression she was kind of wild—"

The phone on Llewellyn's desk rang. He picked up, listened, tightened his lips in a sour look, and handed the phone to Ronnie. "It's for you."

"Ron?" Lois's voice came across so breathless and loud that Ronnie felt sure Detective Llewellyn could hear it; he appeared to be listening. "The people down at the art center say this Gorog guy is a joke. He travels all over the place with those barn-and-covered-bridge lithos; he's in Panama right now doing a show at some vanity gallery. The respectable galleries won't touch him."

Nobody understands who buys the stuff or what keeps him going."

The detective sat back, his mouth softer, thoughtful. Ronnie did not mind his eavesdropping in the least. She said to the phone, "Lois, I love you. Buy yourself a gigantic hot fudge sundae."

"I would if I could afford it."

Ronnie hung up the phone and looked at Detective Llewellyn, who stared back at her across his desk. Ronnie said, "Suppose a kind of shady artist needed a framer to hide something or other that he's smuggling? Something small that could be sandwiched between the mats?"

Llewellyn said nothing, but his stare intensified to the same pitch of interest it had shown when he had first noticed her callused hand.

"I don't think the Tedder guy ever existed. People who buy signed limited editions don't just disappear without a trace. 'Tedder,' isn't that German for manure or something? Horace Tedder. Horse crap."

"Are you German?"

"No, but Melinda was. I think Melinda made up the Tedder order." I've almost been framed, she thought, by a dead framer whose plan went wrong. "I think she felt she was in danger, so she arranged revenge. She used those awful mats because she knew if she didn't come back sooner or later we'd open up the job to reframe it."

After she finished, nothing moved, least of all Detective Lle-

wellyn's face. But then, still with the same intent look, he stirred and spoke. "So she wanted you to find her body? How'd she know he would put her there?"

"She didn't. No, not the body. That's what messed everything up. We were supposed to find whatever else he stored there."

"Such as?"

"How should I know? That's your job." Ronnie stood up. "You're welcome," she added, hinting.

"Huh?"

Oh, what was the use. Men—hopeless. "Can I go now? I oughta get back."

"Back where?"

He was just being obnoxious. Ronnie allowed some edge in her tone. "Back to *normal*?"

He dismissed her without a sign of a smile.

The next week Ronnie was puzzling over an asymmetrical multi-opening mat—the lines on the back had to show the openings in mirror image—when Detective Llewellyn walked into the frame shop. He pushed open the door with his elbow because in each hand he carried a large hot fudge sundae. Without a twitch of greeting or facial expression he handed one to Ronnie and one to Lois.

"Huh?" Ronnie said.

"You got him!" yelled Lois.

Llewellyn nodded. "Met him at the airport with the customs officers. Found an interesting selection of contraband in his so-called artwork."

"So he's under arrest."

"Better. He's confessed."

"Whoa!"

"Some people don't hold up well after murder," said Llewellyn, "and he's one of them. He told us all about it." The detective looked at Ronnie. "You pretty much nailed it except he didn't need or want a framer as a partner. Melinda became involved by accident. What happened was, somebody actually bought one of Gorog's pictures—"

"How unfortunate," Lois said.

Llewellyn gave her a blank look. "There was a mixup, and they got one with packets of cocaine in it. They brought it in here to get different mats put on, and Melinda found the stuff."

"Whoa." Ronnie whispered it this time, feeling a bit sick, remembering the photo of Melinda's dead face.

"She figured it out the same way you did, and she followed Gorog to his stash at Groat's; she

wanted a cut of the take. For a while he went along with her, treated her like a partner, gave her a key, and so on. But of course she kept wanting more."

Which sounded just like Melinda.

"So he killed her, and now she's killing him. End of story. Eat your sundaes."

"Oooh!" cooed the all-too-attractive Tiffany from across the shop. "Detective, are you going to be on the news tonight?"

Detective Llewellyn swiveled his handsome head to look at Tiffany, and for the first time Ronnie saw him smile.

He had a sexy smile. And a sexy butt. For a moment Ronnie spooned ice cream and studied his butt as he bantered with Tiffany. Then she sighed, smiled, put her sundae aside, and penciled the next line on her multi-opening mat. Things were definitely back to normal.

FICTION

SPRING MISCHIEF

Dick Green

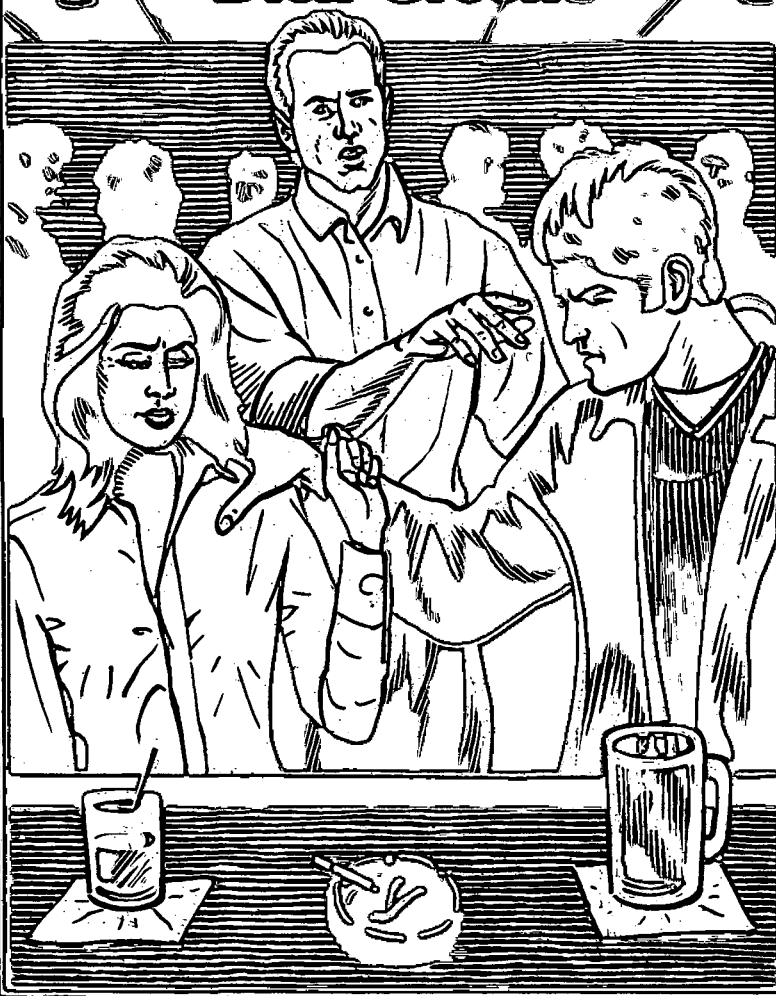


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/99

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When the bartender slid a second bourbon on the rocks in front of Peder, he glanced up, met the girl's eyes in the mirror again. Maybe she didn't qualify as a girl. Maybe somewhere in her thirties, but a slender youthfulness in her face, black hair to shoulders, a twist at a corner of her mouth. Maybe a sense of humor. Then she turned to the dark-haired man beside her, the man she'd come in with. Peder saw her mouth turn down. The man was talking to her. His voice tight and hoarse. She moved away from him on her stool, but he leaned toward her. She was saying something to him beneath canned music and people talking. Her fingers clutched a purse. She started turning, moving a foot to stand in the aisle, but the man's hand, his left one with strong-knuckled fingers, gripped her shoulder, pressed into green silky material, and she flinched.

Peder dropped any pretense of not watching. "Shut up," the man said, words hardly audible but steely. Patrons on each side of the couple stiffened, faked indifference. His fingers dug deeper into her shoulder, pain lighted her eyes. Peder pushed back his stool, walked three places down, and stood behind them. She recognized him in the mirror.

"Things okay?" he asked.

"Get lost." The man's voice a monotone. Under bar lights, his eyes either navy or black. A sharpness to good features.

Peder smiled at her reflection

in the mirror. "You were leaving?"

She slid off the stool, stood beside Peder, almost his height. The dark man unfolded until he was taller than Peder, one of those thick-knuckled hands clutching Peder's shirt, pulling him close. "I told you once, pretty boy!" His free hand, a fist, slammed up beneath Peder's jaw, snapping back his head, jarring his senses.

"Case!" she pleaded. "Don't—" and before she finished, Peder's right fist rammed Dark Boy's stomach. He watched him bend, heard guttural sick sounds, tasted blood in his own mouth. He braced for some reflex attack, but the man was choking, swallowing, turning away. People watched, stepping back, as the man stumbled toward the street door. Peder read anguish in the woman's face, almost as if she were about to tell him off for being rough. She sat on her stool again, hand pressed against a cheek, trembling.

She murmured that she was all right, and Peder felt her other hand around his wrist. The bartender spoke his name, handed him a Band-Aid, and Peder said, "Thanks, Theodore." Theodore moved along, told a joke, people laughed, the incident forgotten.

She blotted his chin with a cocktail napkin, relieved him of the Band-Aid, smoothed it across the cut. She thanked him for his help, sounding embarrassed and he thought not altogether enthusiastic. He noticed a wedding band. Would she go home, resume what-

ever was going on? But he sensed Dark Boy wasn't married to her. Maybe Gordon's training was sinking in. He was beginning to have ideas about people he met or saw on the street. Surprised himself by how often he was right.

But that didn't mean he wanted a license. Gordon said life was sleazy so why not make it pay. Better than nine to five, with the prospect of downsizing.

Peder offered to walk her to her car. She shook her head, and he was looking into her eyes, pale blue. "I came with him. Anyway, he might be waiting." She reached around and picked up her glass, drank what was left in it. "He doesn't usually back down like that." Making excuses or puzzled? Peder wondered. She asked Theodore to call a cab, and Peder was relieved because it didn't seem a good idea to offer a ride. Her gaze was almost like fingertips exploring his face. *Don't order drinks* flashed through his mind. It was too soon to go in over his head. He might not have the breath for it.

"It's my fault," she said. "I kept looking at you in the mirror." She was again, but full in the face now, a curl at the corner of her lips. "Even when I was a little girl, I wanted hair that color. Straw in sunlight. You must be Scandinavian. Like your name." He felt his smile flatten.

"I wasn't really prying. I just asked Theodore if he knew you, and he said you're a private detective."

Peder shook his head. "That's

my uncle. I'm in town giving it a once-over."

"Baltimore or the job?" He shrugged. "I'm sorry. I'm insatiable," she said, and laughed. "I mean curiosity." But what's said is said, he thought. Anyway, it didn't matter. Maybe he was being rough on her. She was trying to make the best of an awkward scene a few minutes ago. Where was *his* sense of humor? Rosie always said that was the first thing she liked about him.

"Young enough to still make choices," she said soberly beside him. "Don't waste them." And some guard inside him weakened. Because he couldn't remember a woman sitting next to him in a bar, shining a light against her age.

When a cab driver pushed into the bar, Peder thought the least he could do was walk her to the cab in case Dark Boy was still hanging around.

They left through cigarette smoke and music, stepped out into a soft May night, thin fog hanging over Fells Point and the harbor. For the first time he caught her scent. Jasmine. He scanned the block but didn't see the man from the bar.

"I wish I was in your office and could talk," she said.

"He'll come after you?"

"He's from years ago."

"I'm not licensed." Blackmail, he guessed. "My uncle. Gordon Troupe. Give him a call." He was handing her a card from his wallet when he saw beyond her shoulders—oh Christ!—smashed

windows of his Mustang. Anger choked him. He saw fright in her face as she backed away. She was saying something, maybe an apology for this man—this strong-armed bastard!

He stood beside the red '85, the car he'd used through college, crossed the country in with Rosie, and finally driven to Baltimore in, alone. Charm City! Like hell!

He watched the cab turn onto Thames Street, rattle along Belgian bricks. He wished she didn't have the agency's card. Hoped she didn't call Gordon.

Gordon was waiting for him the next afternoon after the glass shop replaced a windshield and three windows. Thankfully, no black marks with the insurance company. Vandalism. No increase in premium, no drain from what was left in the bank.

"A Gloria Auburn called," Gordon said. Peder sank into a chair in front of Gordon's desk, knowing Gloria Auburn's identity. And like some sonic boom in his head, realized he'd never asked her name and she didn't offer it. But he wanted to know this son-of-a-bitch Case's name. "She'll call back. Wants to talk to you. I don't see why you can't help her. It's not like you need a license just to be sort of—I guess—protection." Gordon was a few years older than Peder's father would have been. Tall, still fit, thick white hair. Favored gray suits and white shirts freshly ironed every morning by Aunt Lou. "I tried to tell

you from the start. This isn't what you're used to. People don't exactly respect us."

She called back later, her voice low, tentative.

"I'm sorry about what happened, Peder. That's what he's done before and what I can look forward to." And like an afterthought: "We arrived in the bar almost on your heels. He could have seen you parking."

He'd thought about her before falling asleep last night. Remembered reading that jasmine scented chambers in Egyptian pyramids. Decided things were cut from an old pattern. "It's something you don't want your husband to know. Want somebody with you while you buy him off. How do you know he won't come back?"

"I need time—more than anything."

She wanted him to meet her at the Courtyard Motel in the country, not at her home for obvious reasons and Case would never agree to come to a detective agency's office. So it would be the Courtyard at three tomorrow afternoon. She'd register under Seldes. Case, she assured him, would watch his manners if he thought money might come his way. But Peder wondered about his own behavior. He hung up, feeling shabby. Knew this wasn't for him. Missed the urgency of a deadline.

The telephone in his studio apartment on Calvert Street rang three times before twelve that night, and whoever it was hung

up when he answered. Was there a squirrel on his back?

Next afternoon, Wednesday, was ninety degrees, sunny, pale green with new leaves and grass. A circular patch of ground in the middle of the motel's driveway was thick with daffodils. Peder slid back dark glasses to see their yellowness. It occurred to him that almost invariably his work included some mention of weather, growing things. They gave him a sense of reality, a contrast to life's grimness. A young man behind the desk told him that Gloria Seldes was in 12-A. "She's expecting you, Mr. Seldes." He drove to one of the brick wings with picture windows and balconies, shaded with trees. I've left the beach, he told himself, maybe waist deep in surf, but still time to swim back. All morning he wondered why he was letting himself be maneuvered. In this instant he knew. Gloria Auburn was vulnerable. Not making excuses or trying to run.

"He called last night," she told him, closing the door. "He sounded suspicious about your being here but finally came around. Most everybody does," she said, looking Peder straight in the eyes, "when enough money's involved."

Not today, but he and this man Case—

Her hair was pulled back to a soft knot at the nape of her neck, but he didn't think she could ever look prim. Eyes the shade of sky, silver earrings dangling almost

to her shoulders. Jasmine in the room. She offered a bourbon from the bottle on the bureau and he accepted, watching her slender hands use tongs for ice. She didn't know what time Case—Case Wilder, she said—would arrive. So, sitting on the rigid cushion of a contemporary chair, he asked her to bring him up to date.

"A girl in her early twenties—" she paused to light a cigarette, "should never write letters to a man she's sleeping with. Even if she goes ahead and marries him."

She was in her eighth year of marriage to George Auburn, and she was candid enough to admit that love didn't pull her into it. "They were sincere letters I wrote to Case. Case was different then. We lived in Amarillo, down in Texas. We thought he had a future in real estate. But things never changed. Always trying to live up to people who really didn't have enough of what I wanted. So I take the blame."

"Love letters?" Peder asked. He'd written a few to Rosie. "Your husband can't hold that against you. You divorced Case Wilder."

She told him about a letter she wrote before she married George Auburn. "I loved Case when and after I left. Before he started being kinky. I thought if I wrote him the truth—I wanted him to forget me. Maybe even despise me. So I wrote that I was letting George Auburn buy me. I'd have everything Case couldn't give me. Everything I wanted."

Leaving Case with a bullet to bite, Peder thought.

She went to a bureau, opened a drawer, and lifted out a red tote bag. Unzipping it, she displayed bills stuffed to the top. "Twenty-five thousand dollars. I've sold some jewelry, but I don't think George will notice. I told you, I need time." Peder was conscious of her reading his eyes. "The future takes care of itself, my mama used to say, as long as you take care of now."

She tensed, glanced at the windows. Peder parted curtains at the sliding door to a patio. His Mustang sat beside her black Buick. Nothing moved but leaves on trees and tulips nodding in grass. "He likes to keep people on edge," she said. "He'll be along."

He sat again in the uncomfortable chair. She sipped at her drink.

"I'm still curious." Her smile didn't look like a smile of a woman who'd turn her back on a man she loved. "About your Scandinavian name."

Hemingway said don't explain. Good advice, Peder thought. But she was asking him, they were here together with nothing else to talk about. Because blackmail, he told himself, is touchy, especially what's behind it.

"My real mother left a note with me, the name written across it. So the people who adopted me, the Troupes, decided I'd keep it."

"It even *sounds* blond," she said.

Rosie'd liked his name. He wondered why he thought of her in this motel room, involved in blackmail, waiting for a violent man to arrive.

He stood up, peered through the part in the curtains again.

"Does your husband have any idea what's going on?"

"He knows I married Case. He's not well. Besides that, he's been in a wheelchair for almost three years."

He was known for raising horses, rode them in Maryland equestrian events. Peder had learned that from Gordon this morning. During a steeplechase, he toppled, injured his spine. Gordon had finished by saying George Auburn must be sixty. Since marrying "this girl from Texas" he'd concentrated on making her happy.

Peder switched on the television. Gloria looked surprised. She poured herself another drink, sat looking stonily at the screen.

Why did he feel jerked around? Because of meeting in the bar? She was maybe seven or eight years older, a beautiful woman. Creamy skin and those eyes like a girl's. He wouldn't deny he'd stared at her in the bar's mirror, wanted to meet her. Not like this. It was so long since he'd let himself feel anything. She was probably desperate. He'd seen some of Case's harshness, and God knows what she wasn't telling him. For the first time he wished he was carrying a gun. Gordon said no way.

When the five o'clock news came on, she reached out and switched off the set. She went to the bureau and picked up the red tote. "He knows I don't like to wait. And he knows I have the money."

Let him come later and find me gone." She gathered her purse from a chair and the bottle. "He'll come tomorrow. We'll be here from three to five."

Peder watched her, rubbing a hand along his jaw. This was crazy stuff. He wouldn't show up tomorrow. Gordon would agree.

Gloria walked to her car, unlocked the door, climbed in, backed up, and drove away as if he weren't there. Peder stood, hands in jacket pockets, watching the shiny black car as it turned onto the highway. He realized that Case Wilder could appear as quickly as Gloria Auburn had left. They'd punch out each other, botch things for his client. Gloria. He slid behind the red Mustang's wheel and a few minutes later blended with traffic into Baltimore.

After eight that evening he stood at the windows of his apartment, gazing down at gleaming malls bordering the inner harbor, and heard someone knocking at his door. He opened up to face a young man with spiky red hair and a white face. His visitor jerked uncertainly, lips spread in a wide smile. "Hello, sugar. I'm Billy Auburn." His feet in low black boots shuffled in some nervous kind of dance. Peder noticed that everything on his body was black and loose. "You've been seeing my mom."

Peder stepped back, not sure what he'd heard. Billy Auburn slipped past him, trailing a cloud of cologne. He stood in the middle of the studio, with its sparse

furnishings, looking from floor to ceiling. "No wonder you're meeting at a motel."

"Martha Stewart's been busy," Peder said, shut the door, stood in front of it.

Billy faced him, laughter deeper than expected rolling out of his throat. His big brown eyes sparkled, and he shook his head, having a great time. Peder was conscious of his stare. "You're sure her type. Young and sort of different."

"She hasn't told me yet. Maybe she sent you to do it."

"Christ, no! Glory'd put a hex on me if she knew I was here." He chuckled, some of the rigid lines in his face softening. "You look like you've stepped in dog doo, Peder Troupe. Relax. Glory's my *stepmom*."

Relief could have been an injection flowing through him. He wondered why.

"You can stop the act." He gestured to a chair for Billy, lowered himself to the arm of one nearby. "What's going on?"

"My father." Suddenly the voice was lower. He's no more than teens, Peder decided. "He's rich, but nobody cares about him. He's sick, the doctor says he doesn't have very much time. Glory does whatever she wants. Like you already know. I found your agency's card on her dressing table this morning. You're a private detective, spent the afternoon with her at the Courtyard. She's dreaming up something against my father, and she's paying you to help her."

"Keep talking stupid," Peder

said, "and I'll pour you a glass of milk."

"I guess you watched TV."

"As a matter of fact, we did."

Billy shot to his feet. Peder stayed perched on the arm of his chair. "Sit down and grow up. Gloria says she needs time. I think she's trying to let your father go in peace. I'm hired to help her." Would he? Yes, he'd be in the motel tomorrow at three. She made needing time sound mysterious. "Do you usually follow your stepmother around? Aren't you in school?"

Billy muttered that he had dropped out of his freshman year at UM. He'd return when things finished. His booted right foot twitched up and down. "You don't sound like a detective. Even look like one." Peder was glad he didn't mention blond hair or he'd have thrown him out.

"I worked for a newspaper. Dried up. Nothing I wrote made sense after a while."

Billy Auburn was subdued, wasn't acting any more. Like Rosie those last few months.

"Glorify—watch her, Mr. Troupe. Be careful, because I saw the look on your face when I said she was my mom."

It rained the next day. Driving to the motel Peder thought the countryside looked fresh as a new watercolor. Gloria brought the bottle of bourbon and was half through a drink when he arrived, the red tote on the bureau. He was easy enough this afternoon to notice the room. Taste-ful, costing her three figures. Her

hair was loose today, as in the bar, a long blue silk dress a dark contrast to the pale eyes. They sharpened when he told her Billy Auburn visited last night.

"He can ruin everything," she said.

"He's trying to protect his father. You could have told me he's dying."

"I could have told you lots of things. You're here because of Case." She lighted a cigarette, moved restlessly around the room. He hoped she wouldn't switch on the television. Instead, she tuned the radio to a soft FM station, volume low. She slumped into a chair, stared at patent leather straps on her sandals. Rain pattered against patio windows behind curtains. Peder waited for the sound of Case Wilder's car or his footsteps along the walk outside. He was sorry he hadn't brought his father's revolver, an old .38; Gordon was giving him target practice on his property and showing him how to keep it oiled and clean. But it was in his suitcase in a closet. He wished they were talking, until she looked across the room at him. "You've lost someone, haven't you? I can tell because of how I feel about Case. I never loved anyone else. I can't believe how he is now. I think he could kill me."

She rose and came across the room, knelt on the rug beside Peder's chair. Jasmine seemed her favorite.

"George Auburn's given me what he promised and been kind. But it's not how I thought. It's not

his fault that he's old. He smells old, Peder." He felt her fingers around his wrist, like the other night in the bar when she was frightened. He turned toward her in the chair. "You smell young and male, wrapped up in sheets like Mama used to iron." His hand on her smooth, bare arm, he wanted to hold her.

Someone's fist was jarring the door. He stood, and Gloria motioned for him to answer.

Billy looked apprehensive about coming in. Peder noticed a green Miata parked crookedly across the court. The spiked hair was limp from rain, but the droopy black pants and shirt could have been dry or wet.

"You've finally got something juicy for your father." Anger stretched Gloria's face, the eyes brooding.

"I don't care what you think." Anxiety tightened the young face. He looked at Peder. "Case Wilder tried to see my father a while ago." Peder saw Gloria clutch the back of a chair. "Nick met him in the drive, and I guess her boyfriend didn't want his face broken. I took a guess and asked him why he wasn't here to meet you. He made out like he didn't know what I was talking about, like I was out of it. Which figures. But he said he'd see you."

He looked out a window as if hoping he wasn't still here when Case arrived, then turned to Peder again, explained that Nick was his father's Man Friday. Helped him in and out of bed, took care of him, drove him around when he

was feeling up to it. Was a Black Belt or something.

Gloria was sitting in a chair, hands flat on thighs, not looking at either of them. "I hope you know what you're doing," Billy said to her.

He shrugged at Peder, a faint grin on his face, and walked out, across the court to his little car.

"Case didn't say anything," Gloria said after Peder shut the door. "Billy'd have been all over me about the letter if he had." She was still in a chair, hands raised to her face. "Oh God! Case. I never know what he'll do."

She reached for a pack of cigarettes, and Peder took a match out of her fingers, lighted it for her. She looked tired, hopeless. He'd seen too much of that. She gazed up at him through smoke. "Have you ever wanted someone to die? Someone you love? Know it's the only way you'll be free? But I haven't a gun or the nerve."

He pulled a chair up facing her, touched her hand, said, "I'll go with you to your husband. We can explain."

She bit her lower lip until he thought he might see red drops. "You're sweet, Peder. Clean." She brushed hair out of eyes, stood up. "I'm going home, hope no damage has been done. We'll be here tomorrow from three to five. Case is trying to frighten me. If he talks to George, he loses any chance of money." Her mouth twisted in a quirky way. "Now he's had a scare. You have to meet Nick before you know what I mean."

Gordon Troupe was still at his

desk at five thirty when Peder sat down heavily in a chair across from him. He told his uncle what was going on, everything, except he was thinking too much about Gloria Auburn.

"This Wilder man and Gloria Auburn," Gordon speculated. "They're testing one another. My money's on her. Sounds like a cool lady."

Peder made no comment. Not even when Gordon pushed back his chair, said the fee was hefty and Peder was no more than a bodyguard. Then he invited him home to supper.

When Peder was walking toward the entrance to his apartment house a little after nine that evening, a slim man with dreadlocks, wearing a probably hand-tailored blue suit, was waiting for him. Beneath marquee lights his complexion was tanned, Caribbean, and his accent confirmed it.

"Pardon, Mr. Troupe. Mr. George Auburn would like to speak to you." He motioned to a black Cadillac parked near the entrance. "I think you know he is—handicapped."

Peder ducked into the rear of the car, and on the other end of the seat George Auburn inclined his head to him. In streetlight he looked sunburned, erect, as if he were in the saddle of one of his show horses. No age really, but not young. A white oxford shirt without tie beneath a blazer. Fit looks were deceptive until Peder heard his breathing.

"Billy described you, Mr. Troupe.

He has a keen eye. But he doesn't know everything about Glory and me." Peder started to speak, but Auburn held up a hand. Skin and bones. "Billy's never liked her. Wicked stepmother stuff. But from what he's told me, I know what's going on. Naturally I know Glory married Case Wilder. Now he's back, wanting money for something that doesn't make any difference. Not when I'm standing on the edge."

"She's going through hell," Peder said. Was Auburn just saying words to get rid of him? Gloria confessed to insatiable curiosity. Billy and his father followed through on it.

"Listen, Mr. Troupe. I've only a couple of weeks left. Billy's staying with me. You can't understand how that makes me feel." He paused, air whistled in and out of his throat. Peder caught a reflection in the rear view mirror of the Caribbean sitting on the front seat. A face firm, desolate. He sensed steel beneath the blue suit. Was aware of Auburn watching him. "I want you to meet Nick Tatter. I have no secrets from Nick. Billy's with me," he repeated, "and I want Glory, too. Telling her what I know—the short time left would be ruined."

Peder stared down at his knees. The poor son of a bitch.

"I can't see why—" Auburn said, his voice hoarse—"why I can't make it worth your while to be sure she's not hurt."

"The agency's already getting paid."

"This is between you and me."

An effort to smile. "Billy says he doesn't think you want to be a detective. You're a reporter. He thinks you're running away."

The kid's probably on something, Peder told himself, but he could read people.

"I watched my wife die." He couldn't think of telling anything but the truth to this man.

Auburn swallowed a breath, pain in his face. "Walking around like a dead man, Mr. Troupe. It's not any kind of tribute to her."

Auburn's words sliced at Peder in the elevator. He opened the door to his lighted studio with the odd sensation of entering a fun house. His reflection seemed crooked in the mirror above a bureau. Because the mirror was slanted, he realized. Chairs were standing where they hadn't stood before. Papers and magazines scattered across the rug. He leaned back against the closed door, eyes moving around the room, sensing, like some hunted animal, that a predator had gone. Nevertheless, he checked the bath and kitchen, angry at himself because he'd known the lock was ripe for a plastic edge, needed a security device to back it up.

He straightened the mess, thinking of his talk with Auburn, the man's precarious health and what could be a blind love for Gloria. At least he knew where he stood with his son.

He froze in the desk chair. He was assembling papers, dismayed at an envelope of photographs spread across the desk, colorful

patches against the blotter. He glared at jagged printing by a marker pen across a photograph of Rosie standing near Old Faithful spouting in Yellowstone, snapped during their cross-country ride in the Mustang. The jagged word was *WHORE*. It was repeated on several other photographs of her. Disgusted, he rose and went to a window, looked down into the harbor, wondering why people did sick things like this. Someone Rosie hadn't even known.

The next morning when he pulled back the shower curtain he saw *PRETTYBOY* scrawled in large jagged letters across white tiles. Naked, immobile, he was sure who had invaded his studio, who was responsible for profaning Rosie, why nothing was missing. He wondered if Gloria realized just how looped out Case Wilder was.

Dressed, working on a second cup of black coffee, he finally decided not to telephone Gloria. He was Wilder's target for some sort of erratic abuse, probably bone crunching, unless he was satisfied with anonymous strikes. But Gloria knew him, she'd said the money would keep him in line. That's all Peder wanted until she was out of the scene and he and Wilder would have room to resolve all this face to face.

He didn't report in to Gordon. He wanted to finish this himself.

Something warned Peder that the single car in front of the motel room registered in the name of Mrs. G. Seldes was a rental. May-

be its license plate or its plain look. Five to three by his watch, he had wanted to be here when Gloria arrived. But it looked like she was still due and Case Wilder had somehow entered the room and was sitting in there, the door slightly ajar. The Mustang was drifting. He turned it to park in a spot across the court, but if Case was looking out the patio window, he'd recognize his target from the night outside the bar in Fells Point.

He didn't want to go in now, turn Gloria's plans helter-skelter. Because being alone with Case Wilder meant trouble. He wished he'd gone against what he was sure his uncle would say. Don't carry his revolver. Still not handy enough with it. No matter how honorable his intentions, he could kill somebody, end up in Maryland's big gray cage off Interstate 83 stalked by bruisers who fancied a blond boyfriend. He'd take his chances with that after Gloria was safe.

He sat in the car, window down, smelling sweet air off grass and trees, wondering if George Auburn guessed that the man who was spending afternoons with his wife in a motel room wasn't focused entirely on paying off Case Wilder.

Quarter after three. Gloria wasn't here. Something was going wrong. He walked, trying to take his time, across the court, sun in his eyes, legs stiff, breathing through his mouth. The door was open a few inches. He thought he heard some sort of sobbing from

within the dark room. He pushed the door in front of him, stepped across the threshold. A figure was sitting in the middle of one of the beds. Peder reached out, caught a drawstring and pulled back curtains over the patio window. Sunlight flooded in.

Billy Auburn sat crosslegged in the middle of the corduroy spread, his face wet with tears, a black and white print bandana wrapped around his head. Peder met the wide brown eyes' stare.

"I've never seen somebody dead before," Billy said.

Peder gazed from left to right until he saw tips of shoes extending from beyond the far bed. Men's loafers, thank God. He moved until he was looking down at what had been the hawkish good looks of Case Wilder. Now the black eyes seeming to glare up at whoever did this as though wishing them in hell. Viscid blood was crusting on his white shirt below a bullet hole in the chest.

"Where's Gloria?" Peder asked the boy on the bed. He went to him, placed a hand on his shoulder.

Billy swallowed, managed a shuddering breath. "She was here. When I came. He was already dead, Mr. Troupe. Honest to God! I got here early because I wanted to let Nick know if Glory'd need him. Because of how my father feels about her." He slid to the edge of the bed, let his legs hang over, looked up at Peder, his eyes pleading for belief. "She was standing where you just stood. The door was unlocked, and I just opened it and came in. And she looked at

me like she didn't know where she was. And we both stood looking at him, and I knew he was dead. She said he was like that when she came. Somebody'd shot him with this." And Billy pulled a handgun from a pocket in his voluminous black trousers.

An old .38 revolver. His father's. The one he'd been using to aim at a bull's-eye nailed to a tree in a clearing behind Gordon's house. He took it from Billy, made sure it wasn't live. Jesus! How many people had pawed it already? Numb, he turned his back on Billy. A picture of the brown leather suitcase in his closet was as clear in his mind as if he'd switched on the TV and seen it displayed in full color on the screen. Now the suitcase was empty. He'd forgotten to check to see if the .38 was still there.

"Where's Gloria?"

"I told her to go home. I knew my father'd want her out of this. She said you'd be here soon." He stood up, wiping his face with a handkerchief. "And she said she hoped you hadn't been here before any of us."

Peder thought most people would wonder about that. He told Billy he didn't see his Miata outside, and Billy explained he'd parked off the motel grounds, walked across a field in back of the place. The young man at the check-in desk would have seen Gloria's car, his Mustang, and Case would have stopped by to learn the room number, unless Gloria gave it to him.

Peder let the revolver hang at

his side. "Go someplace, Billy. Don't talk to anybody. Go to a movie. Sit through it a couple of times. Don't go home without calling first. For Christ's sake, don't take anything."

"You're calling the police?" But Peder nailed the boy with a severe look, and he fled, a clownish figure in his baggy black clothes and bandana.

Peder wished Gloria'd brought the bourbon this afternoon and forgotten it. He held the revolver close to his nostrils and smelled the tang of burned powder, like when he shot targets. He looked at the telephone between beds. No police. Gordon had skipped the chapter about murder, he guessed, because the agency dealt mostly with divorce stuff and missing people. They'd close a cell door after him before he knew what was going on. That was the trouble. He didn't know what was going on. What *went* on. Why Gloria arrived early. Case, maybe earlier. At least Billy could say I was the last to get here, he told himself, if anyone took him seriously. He stood looking out at the sunny, deserted parking area. He suspected that he was exactly where someone wanted him.

Driving the Mustang along Falls Road north of Baltimore, he decided that finding a particular horse farm in Greenspring Valley was like deciding which walnut shell covered a pea. After following a dirt drive to the wrong house, he saw a sign with AUBURN FARMS painted across it and drove along a tarred drive to

a colonial house surrounded by trees. Sun shone on white stables and an oval exercise track in the distance. He recalled Gordon's mentioning the other day that after Auburn's accident the horses were sold. Grounds and shrubs were well kept, but there was a deserted look to the place. Gloria's Buick was parked near the foot of steps to a surrounding porch. Gloria, so youthful looking and vital. Living here with an invalid husband she'd never loved and a stepson with problems. What did she do with herself out here, a thousand miles from town?

He parked, walked along a sand path, honeysuckle in the air, and climbed steps.

The front door was open, and Nick, in white jacket and dark trousers, stood waiting behind a screened door. His face, beneath dreadlocks, was calm.

"Miss Glory said you'd probably be along." He opened the screen door. In the entrance hall Peder's eyes followed a curving staircase, but Nick led him past it. Ceilings were high, rooms dim, cool, fragrant with potpourri, and Peder walked along behind Nick's white back into what Victorian novels he'd read in college termed an orangery. Lush plants, some the size of trees, in clumps along a glassed-in room, rays of sun slanting through panes in the ceiling. "I'll get Miss Glory," Nick said. Before he left, he glanced across his shoulder, eyes flat. "You heard what Mr. Auburn told you last night. A time comes when things don't matter."

Peder didn't think it sounded like a warning. More like sad resignation. He gazed around at greenery he couldn't identify, moist air on his face. He was here with a revolver licensed to himself in his jacket pocket, it was used to murder Case Wilder, and he'd left the body in a motel room without calling the police. A really shrewd lawyer, he thought. I'll need one. And when I tell him all this, he'll be sobbing like Billy Auburn was little more than an hour ago. Gordon will have an attack.

Heels clicked across tiles. He saw Gloria and stepped from behind a luxuriant palm. She stiffened, a blue scarf trailing over one arm, keys jingling in her hand as if she were ready to leave for some late afternoon cocktail party where people would compliment her green silk dress. She stopped several feet from him, face set. "You shouldn't be here." She glanced across her shoulder, back at him. "I didn't mean for you to go this far, Peder."

"Somebody's way ahead of me," he said. A chill in her eyes, and he clamped teeth. "I came in after you left. Billy was crying like at a wake. I don't understand. Why you got there so early. Didn't let me know. That's what you're paying me for—protection."

She closed her eyes, suddenly trembled, like she'd done that night in the bar. "I'll do everything I can for you. Explain to the police that Case called. Told me you wanted to meet him alone in the motel and would pay him off."

"I didn't know where the hell to call him."

"You didn't have the money. So I knew you meant to frighten him or—" She turned away, braced against the back of a wicker chair. "I couldn't let you do it. But I was too late."

He felt the edge of some awful depth behind him. "This was all between you and Case. Nobody else. Billy stuck his nose in because of his father."

He stepped toward her. She moved away, keys jingling. "Billy! Poor Billy! He must've come back to get the gun. Found me. It was in my mind, Peder, when he came in. But I didn't want to think it. He kept saying, 'Don't panic, Glory! Don't panic, Glory!' And I left because I was afraid. Because he's—you must *know* he's not really—normal."

"He's on something. But he's not crazy."

"It's Billy! Or they're going to stick a needle in *you*, Peder." She looked around, lowered her voice to a harsh rasp. "I needed time. Now it's all right. Case is dead. George has maybe days. You and I—"

Exasperated, she stomped a foot, high heel hammering against tile. "Billy belongs in an asylum. That's where they'll put him."

"He didn't kill anybody." Peder watched her eyes glaze.

"If he didn't, explain your gun being there."

"I never mentioned a gun." Somewhere in his head he thought he heard the fat lady *beginning* to sing.

"Billy told me. He told me he stole it. From your apartment."

"Billy won't tell that to the police."

"We'll say he's lying. He's insane." She saw Peder shake his head. "Don't be stupid. What are you trying to do?"

"He's trying to save my son." The voice startled them. Gloria pressed the scarf to her lips. Peder turned toward an island of plants and a gnarled orange tree. George Auburn wheeled his chair into view. Sunlight wasn't as kind as dim light within the Cadillac last night. He was skeletal in pale silk pajamas. Nick came in from the hall, stood behind the chair. "It's over, Glory," Auburn said. "All the lies."

She backed toward Auburn, pointing at Peder. "He shot Case Wilder."

"Shut up, Glory." Auburn inhaled a shallow breath. "Mr. Troupe doesn't have a reason to kill Wilder. You did. Because you never divorced him."

Peder listened to her swear it wasn't true. Saw the vulnerable look, as if she'd pressed a button. Wondered if she'd gotten far enough inside him, teased him enough, that he'd cross some line in the sand. Even when he'd felt jerked around. One afternoon after another. Case never showing up. Because Case didn't know he was expected. Gloria was hammering a frame, Peter thought. Establishing for the motel people that we were meeting regularly. And when Case showed up today, Gloria would shoot him, and I'd

be the jealous lover facing an indictment.

"She's conned you, Mr. Troupe," Auburn said, and Gloria stood beside his chair like an ice sculpture. "My lawyers let me know from almost the beginning that she was still married. Wilder had disappeared. I didn't care. Call it arrogance, too much money. I let her think she'd put one over on me. Because I loved her. I think you're just beginning to know what that's like."

Probably no letters. Peder was looking at her, wondering what was going on behind the pale eyes. She'd kept saying she needed time. The sun shone down into the orangery through still plants and vines, intricate patterns across the tiled floor. Like all this, Peder thought. Why did Case wait so long before blackmailing her? Or was he looking at it from the wrong end?

"Maybe Case Wilder fell in love and wanted to get married," Peder said and saw her eyes narrow. "Maybe *needed* to marry this girl. You thought a divorce would show you up with your husband. You wanted to wait until after he died, left you a share of his money—the time business."

"What difference does it make?"

Gloria asked, looking from one to the other, even to Nick. She twisted the scarf between her hands. The creamy skin of her face was mottled. "Tell the police anything you like. But I'll stand up in court and swear Billy Auburn surprised Case and me in the motel and shot him through the heart. I'll

say I still loved Case. That Billy was trying to keep me from hurting his father." Her cynical smile for Peder stung him. "Next time a lady tells you about letters she wrote, ask to see one." She shook her head, black hair dipping across one eye. "It's your word against mine why I hired you. I'll swear it was to protect Case and me from Nick."

Nick's dark face remained inscrutable.

Peder saw desperation pull at George Auburn. Head trembling, hands twitching. "People won't believe you," Auburn said.

"Use every damned one of your expensive lawyers. I'll tell the jury how your coked-up son shot Case with a stolen gun. All they have to do is see Billy. They'll know he's crazy."

A sharp crack, like a July Fourth firecracker exploding beside Peder's ear. He saw Gloria sag, a bewildered look across her face. A red stain spreading down the green dress between her breasts. He reached her before Nick. Kept her head from hitting the tiles. Knelt on the floor, cradling her, the soft feel of her body within his arms, a jasmine scent. Until she was still, and he recalled his grandmother saying, "the forever silence."

A small revolver slipped from George Auburn's limp right hand and fell to the floor. Nick bent over him. His breathing was rough, his gaze fastened on Gloria. "Always jealous of Billy," he managed to say. "Couldn't take a chance. Don't worry, Mr. Troupe—" His voice

fading to a whisper. "We'll have good lawyers."

Two days later George Auburn slipped into a coma. Sitting across the desk from Gordon, Peder knew he'd never tell anyone about suspecting he was being jerked around from the beginning but didn't feel the hook sink in, was only conscious of the line tightening that last afternoon in the motel, Billy shivering and sobbing. But he thought Gordon sensed most of it.

"You're lucky the kid barged in on Gloria when he did. She could have shot Case, walked away. You'd have arrived, found your gun. The motel people would talk about your afternoons with the woman in 12-A." Billy saved my ass, Peder told himself. Somehow he'd thank him.

Auburn's lawyers were already verifying most of Peder's speculations about Case Wilder.

"Case trashed my car, and Gloria mimicked him with telephone calls one night and then getting into my apartment to make it look like he was stalking me. Because I'd paid attention to her. Couldn't resist opening a suitcase and found my .38. It was like having my head on a platter." Peder glanced down at the number ten envelope he'd carried into Gordon's office. A note from his former editor, saying his job

was still open. But Gordon was short-handed. There were so many levels to these cases, even routine ones, if you looked. Maybe grist for some future project. He could almost hear computer keys clicking.

"Case didn't know how busy Gloria was. He was quick with his temper and fists but probably more human than Gloria painted him. Wanted a divorce to marry his girl and be a father. Gloria might not have offered him money. The toté could have been stuffed with paper except for the top layer of bills. Maybe Case went to Auburn to frighten Gloria into starting a divorce, or lay out the whole business. Who knows? She must have told him to be at the motel that last afternoon, earlier than I knew."

"That night in the Fells Point bar," Gordon said. "She probably fingered you right away when you tried being the White Knight. Then things fell in line for her." His smile was indulgent. "I don't imagine you put up a fight."

Peder slid the envelope into a jacket pocket. Jasmine perfume, icy blue eyes. Not pale but icy, he'd learned, and she was ready to feed him to sharks. He knew there wasn't another Rosie out there. But there was a girl he'd fall in love with. Because of Gloria. In her rotten way she'd turned him human again.

FICTION

THE CAR IN THE WOODS

Mike Owens

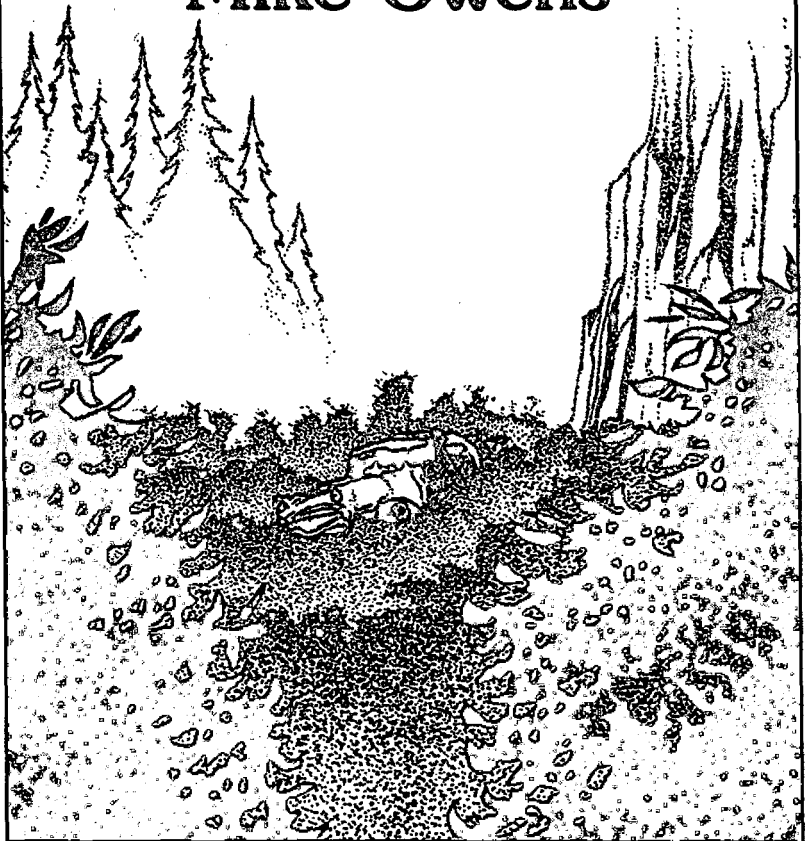



Illustration by David Monette

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The power line road skirts the edge of Lake Meditation and winds off into the distance toward Whitefork. The land around the lake is flat and full of the sound of the nearby freeway, but the trails that lead into the woods can drop you suddenly into deep forest where ancient cedars and firs soak up the noise.

I had just crossed a clearcut to pick up the trail on the other side. It wasn't easy to find, and in the process of blundering about, I nearly stumbled off the edge of a bramble-choked ravine hidden by a thick growth of alder and vine maple. As I turned to move back toward the trail, sunlight reflected from something at the bottom. Curious, I started a slow progress down through the thick growth.

It was a car. A Chevrolet. From the fifties. The paint was completely worn off, replaced by a smooth patina of rust that covered the metal body. The trunk lid was up, at about half-mast, a piece of thick wire dangling from its catch. The trunk itself was empty. A few leaves had blown in over the years, but that was all. I pushed down on the lid; it moved slightly and then, as the rust cracked loose, settled snugly into its closed position. If not for the piece of wire, it probably would have locked. They don't make them like that any more. There was one small hole, dead center.

I made my way back up the slope, trying to cover the evidence of my passage, for the bullet hole made it seem important that the car remain hidden. Back on the trail I stepped out from the trees to stand in the clearcut and looked up toward the power line road. That's where it would have come from, up the road, past the lake, and down to where I was standing. The trees that bordered the ravine probably didn't exist back then, and there would have been nothing to prevent the car's fall into the little canyon.

I told Frank about it.

"Well," he said, "there was something in the trunk at the time of the shooting, or you'd have found a hole in the floor."

"What do you think it might have been?"

He shrugged. "Spare tire. I don't know. The lid was up. Whatever it was, it could have been something of value—a tire could still be useful. Or something that could decay. Something the animals and birds could have taken. For nest building. Or food."

"Food?"

"A body."

I shook my head. "A body's going to leave something behind. Bones, a belt buckle, even after forty years."

"Still," said Frank, "that's the second thing. It seems logical to me that the bullet hole is the reason for hiding the car."

Early the next morning I went back to the ravine. The good autumn

weather still held, and the morning air was crisp and clean as I worked my way down to the car. I lifted the trunk lid. The piece of wire caught my eye again. It had the look of something fashioned, as though it had been formed into a C shape. Maybe a very long, thick nail. I slipped it off and put it in my pocket.

A light wind set the slender tops of the thick-trunked trees in motion, and the woods filled slowly with the sighing rush of its passage. Morning light crept down into the ravine, and when it reached the bottom, it found me leaning against the car. At that moment I decided I wanted to know why.

On the off-chance that I might get something in the way of information, I made the rounds of the body shops in Whitefork, telling them I was interested in vintage cars. Especially Chevrolets. Especially from the fifties. I talked to a sullen young man at Bobby D's Auto who fit the stereotype for folks in the business. Mike Mulligan of Mulligan's Motors was cheerful and articulate and didn't fit the stereotype at all. So it went, through Whitefork and on out to Duvall and Carnation as well, since they were close enough to be involved. Nothing came of it, other than my handing out a lot of business cards, and with no leads, nowhere to go, I let it drop. I had enough to do for Santucci Investigations, and Frank preferred a paying customer.

I paid for the meal with a check, and the woman behind the counter looked at it for a moment, considering. "Something wrong?" I asked.

She looked up. "Sorry. Something familiar about your name." She shook her head and rang the check into the cash register and then remembered. "You're the Chevy guy! Sure. About a year ago, looking for an old Chevy." She rummaged in her purse, pulled out a battered business card, and handed it to me.

I stood there looking at it, remembering the car in the woods. "Why would you have this?"


"I knew a guy once. Dwayne. Had a Chevy the year you were looking for. Davy, at the shop, he told me. Figured maybe I'd know whether the guy still had the car."

"Does he?"

"Davy's not too bright. He hasn't noticed that Dwayne hasn't been around for a long time. Besides, most people don't keep a car forty years."

"But Dwayne was the name of the guy who owned the car?"

She had to think for a minute. "Well, not exactly. His name was Robert. Robert Patterson. We were in a gang. Cool, you know?" she leaned on the counter, looking down, remembering. "All four of us had a gang name. All but Richie. Richie was Richie. Gary Johnson was Billy like in Billy the Kid, and Robert was Dwayne. I was Babes." She



smiled and touched her hand to her hair. Brown hair, green eyes, nicely lived-in face. I could have told her she still looked good enough to be a Babe, but I didn't know whether or not one could say something like that these days. I said something else, instead. "Do you know where I can find this Dwayne?"

She shook her head. "The gang broke up our last year of high school. Gary Johnson's dead, I think, and Dwayne just disappeared right after graduation. I think his parents died. I never heard anything more about Richie. He just went away. They all did." She moved on down the counter to wait on a new arrival, and I stood there, frustrated by the information because I didn't know what to do with it.

She came back to refill my coffee. "This gang," I said. "Was Dwayne the leader?"

She smiled. "No, Dwayne was a wannabe. Big and dumb. Richie led. Billy was his stooge, and I was Richie's girl. We called ourselves The Snakes. We were harmless, really, just kids looking for some excitement."

"So you hung out together and then eventually Dwayne left town. Did he sell the car? Maybe someone in town bought it from him?"

"Now, that's funny. Geez, I haven't thought of this in years. I don't think I ever knew what happened to that car."

She told me her story.

That evening I went out to Lake Meditation. Back then the area wasn't a state park, and one could drive the road. Kids would come up to neck, get into trouble. The Snakes had come up here on that day, Debbie had said, riding in Dwayne's brand-new car. Dwayne always had a car. They were his passion, but this was the first time for a brand-new one, and this was the first time the Snakes had ridden in it. It would have been about this time of the evening, with the light slowly fading into dusk, just chilly enough to discourage the usual group of kids.

They broke out the beer and stood around, leaning against the car, getting drunk. Somebody spilled beer on the hood and Dwayne got mad; he yanked a rag from his back pocket and wiped it off. Then Richie poured the rest of his beer on the windshield and started taunting Dwayne about the car, calling him a poor little rich kid, saying maybe he was too good for the Snakes, now he had this fine new car. Dwayne took it seriously. He wasn't very swift and took everything seriously. Richie did that all the time. It got a rise out of Dwayne, and the rest of the gang thought it was funny, but this time it got out of hand.

He blew up. Started screaming that money meant nothing. The car meant nothing. He'd show them. He'd prove it. Debbie said he went around to the passenger side, reached into the glove compartment, and came up with a handgun.

Everyone stopped laughing. Richie looked interested, waiting to see what Dwayne would shoot. Billy was nervous, watching Richie, waiting to take a cue from him.

Debbie didn't wait. "I left as soon as that gun showed up. I headed off toward town. When I reached the place where the road drops down to Whitefork, I turned to look back."

Dwayne had leaped onto the back of the car. Holding the gun straight down, he fired into the trunk. "I figured the jerk was proving money meant nothing by shooting his car." The sound echoed back from the lake, and in the silence that followed it seemed to Debbie that something had gone wrong. Everybody stood as though frozen, staring at Dwayne, who looked as though he were praying, head down, arms straight, still holding the gun. At that point she realized she no longer wanted to be a part of The Snakes, so she turned and went on down the road to Whitefork. "It was the last time I ever saw that car. And the gang broke up right after that. I'd see Dwayne once in a while at school, or Billy, but that was it. No more Snakes. No more Richie."

I looked at my watch. Eight o'clock. Enough light to go see the car again. I walked back up the road, then down the clearcut and into the woods. Even knowing it was there, I had trouble finding it, but eventually I stood at the edge of the ravine. It seemed to me that the tangle of blackberries leading down the slope was less than it had been a year ago. I slid down a couple of feet for a better look. It was true: there were places where canes had been cut and removed. Someone had been here after I'd found the car.

I dug my heels into the slope and sat down, trying to penetrate the gloom. Everything was changed now. The deep silence of the big trees was charged with the fact of an intruder. A bird scratching in the nearby leaves made me jump. Wind moved the big firs and caused them to rub against each other, creaking as though old doors in the forest were opening. The light steadily failed, and the bottom of the ravine was no longer visible. I worked my way down, and when I got there, things were so changed I almost forgot what I'd expected to see.

The trunk lid and hood were gone along with all four wheels and various pieces of the engine. Somebody had tried to steal my car, and they'd managed to make off with at least half of it before giving up. From the amount of new growth I estimated that the attempt had ended four or five months back.

The light was totally gone now. The wind had picked up; the forest was full of surreptitious sound as unseen men made their way toward the car, coming to finish what they'd started. When they got there, they'd find me, defenseless and blind in the sighing dark.

I made it back up to the trail in half the time it had taken to come down, and I didn't breathe easy till I'd escaped the big trees and stood

once more in the clearcut where there was still some residual glow from the dying sun.

"What was missing?" Frank asked.

I thought about what I'd seen and then began to detail the pieces. Frank shook his head and asked me to get to the engine, then stopped me before I finished. "The I.D. number," he said. "Our man's dumb but not stupid. Once he'd taken the I.D. and the bullet hole, he figured he could leave the rest."

I told Frank about the gang. About dumb but maybe not stupid Dwayne and the way he disappeared after high school. And Richie, neither stupid nor dumb, also gone.

"It's not tough to disappear," said Frank, "if nobody's looking for you. I have neighbors behind me, maybe a couple of hundred feet away. There's this little patch of woods. I can see their house all winter, not in the summer. We have different lifestyles. We've met; maybe once every two years I'll see them in town. But there's no reason for me to walk through the woods to visit." He stopped as though finished.

"What's your point?"

"It's possible the same people no longer live there. I don't know. I'm not looking for them. Nobody looked for Dwayne or for Richie. They might have simply moved, one to Seattle, the other to Wyoming. If nobody cared, it would be as though they'd 'disappeared' should anyone, years later, happen to think about them. But if there *was* a body in the trunk of that car, it's possible somebody cared."

"Debbie gave me a name." I said. "Mrs. Wilson, the librarian at the high school back then. She's a volunteer at the public library these days. She knew all the kids. Maybe she'd know something."

Frank shook his head. "That can wait. First, run an ad: 'Missing, forty years. Seeking person disappeared circa 1955, bent nail a clue.'" He pulled a pad over, wrote it down, tore it off and handed it to me. "There. Maybe this'll get us a paying client. Then we can visit Mrs. Wilson and a few auto body shops."

I looked blank. "The missing parts," he said. "Somebody saw your business card with 'Santucci Investigations' on it."

I ran the ad in a half-dozen places, and the months went by. I thought of the car in the woods and figured that at the speed I was moving it could have totally disappeared by now. And then Ann Cartwright called. She lived in Bellingham and had come to Seattle for the day. She wanted to talk to us about our ad.

She was short, dark-complexioned. Black hair barely shot with gray. Small, competent-looking hands held what used to be a C-shaped metal rod. "My granddad made this," she said. "He'd bend up

a bunch of these things in a vise, and then he'd slip one up his sleeve and pretend to bend it with his fingers. He'd give them to my friends, and they'd think I was really something, to have a granddad who could do that. We called them 'magic nails.' We never did figure it for a trick."

She pushed it back across the desk toward Frank. "I never saw your ad. It was a friend from years ago. She lives in Seattle now and ran across the ad and kept it, meaning to give me a call, but she forgot until just a few days ago." She touched the piece of metal again. "I know it was him. Where did you find him?"

I told her about the car. "Why would this have been dangling from the lock?"

"He was a locksmith. All his life. He loved locks; saw them as puzzles, something to be solved. There wasn't a lock in the world could keep him out. And he loved to travel. Just get in the car and drive. When he got too old for that, somebody else would drive. And when his mind started to go, he'd get in the car and just sit there, waiting to go somewhere. Sometimes it would be some stranger's car, and the police would be called and they'd bring him back home, and Mom would redouble her efforts to keep an eye on him.


"Then he started picking trunk locks and crawling inside. He'd use one of his magic nails to keep the lid shut and a wooden shim to keep it from bouncing. My parents couldn't figure why people would be so willing to drive him to the next town, but then they found out what he was doing. They took the nail from him, but three months later he'd be over in Blaine. It didn't happen all that often, and my parents didn't want to put him in a home. They figured that eventually they could control him."

I thought about being an old man riding around in the back of a car, not knowing where I was going, just going somewhere. Maybe he knew somehow that it was the one thing left he could do for himself. "How did he manage to get home?" I asked.

"If you can't fight 'em, join 'em," she said. "We always made sure he had I.D. People would call us. Sometimes the police would call. In those days people didn't have much reason to travel, out our way. Just little trips from one small town to another. He'd climb out of the car and wander down the street in a little town maybe twenty miles away, and eventually somebody would stop him. He didn't look like a bum. Not Granddad. He looked like a dignified old man who was momentarily confused, and people instinctively wanted to help."

He must have gotten out of some car in Whitefork. He wasn't twenty miles from home—more like a hundred miles from Bellingham. When nobody stopped to help, he got into another car. Maybe he figured it would take him back.

Ann touched the little metal rod again, tracing its curve with her



finger, dark eyes soft with memory. "They tried to stop him, my folks. They watched him. The neighbors watched him. I watched him. But one day we found his wallet still on the dresser, and he was gone. We searched. The police searched, but that was it. We never saw him again."

She took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. "I was only ten. Just ten and I'd lost the best friend I ever had. I never really got over it. He left me twice, you see. Once when his mind went and then in some unknown car. I couldn't hate him, but I resented him for what happened. And now I find him again, in Whitefork."

"Perhaps he knew what he was doing," Frank said.

"I don't understand."

"He left his wallet, the link by which he could be traced back to his family. Maybe he decided, in a lucid moment, to free that family of the burden he'd become."

She thought about that. "It could be. It would have been like him." She studied her hands folded over her purse, thinking something over, and then came to a decision. "I want to hire you. I want you to find who did this to him. Who left him in the forest to rot away in the trunk of a car?" The dark eyes were no longer soft.

I spent some time in Bellingham talking to the police. Their take was that the old man had been mugged and dumped. Or he'd gravitated to the homeless community in some distant town and then had been mugged and dumped. They'd found no trace; they were still waiting for a body to turn up. I made the rounds of Whitefork and Duvall, showing the picture of old Mr. Cartwright. Nobody had seen him before. Before I started on the auto body shops, I figured I'd talk to Mrs. Wilson.

The library was a tiny room crammed with books, most of them paperbacks. Mrs. Wilson, now in her seventies, still remembered The Snakes. "Do-nothing, no-talent kids playing follow the leader," she said, leafing through the yearbook on her lap. I sat beside her at one of the tables and looked on as she pointed them out. She knew Debbie, "the only decent one of the bunch." She remembered Richie but couldn't recall Gary Johnson.

Robert Patterson's picture in the yearbook showed a longhaired kid a bit on the large side, maybe a bit on the dim. He had a smirk, an ugly twist of the lips that gave him the look of some mean little kid trying to pretend he knew something you didn't. Mrs. Wilson remembered him. "His parents had sold a Seattle business and retired to Duvall. The boy had it pretty easy—plenty of pocket money, cars."

None of The Snakes appeared anywhere else. No clubs, no sports, no candid shots with clever captions. Mrs. Wilson remembered that Robert's parents died in a housefire, and sometime after that Robert

was gone. "I don't think anyone noticed," she said. "Bobby wasn't the kind of boy one cared about, you see. He was a loner except for The Snakes, and I'm sure his membership there depended a great deal upon his ready access to a car."

She snapped the yearbook shut and got up to replace it on the bookshelf. She sat back down and looked out of her front window, still somewhere in the past, and then asked, "Why did they call him Dwayne?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Dwayne. Debbie was Babes. Billy as in Billy the Kid. Why that nickname? He already had a nickname—Bobby. Why would this Richie have decided to call him Dwayne?"

Somehow I knew that was the key. "Mrs. Wilson," I said, "I can't thank you enough." She nodded, a brisk gesture that said she was aware of that.

It was just a short walk up the street to where Debbie worked. "I think Richie wanted to keep him separate. I mean, he wanted the car, but he didn't want Bobby. So he just used Bobby's middle name. Like he was in the gang, but not really."

And there it was. Frank had already said it after I found the car half missing: somebody had seen my business card. Robert Dwayne Patterson; Bobby Dwayne; Bobby D. Nobody looked for him and so he "disappeared" by moving thirty miles from Duvall to Whitefork, eventually getting into the auto body business.


At that point Frank would have simply turned the evidence over to the police. Ann wanted more: "I want to go with you," she said. "He killed my grandfather. I want to ask him why." We argued persuasively for the letter of the law, and she left Frank's office convinced, we thought, that we were right. It occurred to both of us at the same time that she had enough of the pieces to figure out where to find Bobby D. Frank got on the phone while I ran to my car.

Her car was parked in front of Bobby D's Auto, its engine still ticking as it started to cool. I jogged into the gloom of the shop and headed toward the closed office door on the other side of the room, calling Ann's name. I burst through the door, surprising both of them. Bobby D was sitting behind his desk, Ann on a spindly folding chair. Bobby D still had the smirk, but it had faltered and his skin looked gray: Ann had told him. Then as I stood there, trying to catch my breath, the smirk came back full force. "What the hell," he said. "It's been over seven years."

It took me a minute, then I realized he thought he was immune. I didn't bother to set him straight. Bobby's lawyer would use that, but right now it was Ann's show.

He spoke to Ann. "It was an accident. No way I could know the old man was in there."

"When *did* you finally realize?" I asked.



He turned from Ann to look at the wall. "We could hear him when the noise died down. The echo. He was groaning." He turned back to Ann as though seeking her support. "He'd rigged some kind of latch from the inside. It took me and Richie and Billy together to get the trunk open, and there he was. The bullet got him in the belly, and while we stood there, he quit groaning. Richie tried for a pulse, but the old guy was gone. Richie said I had to hide him or my life was over."

"But you didn't know, did you?" Ann asked. "Richie said he was dead, and you accepted that. He could have been alive. You could have gotten him help."

Bobby D held his big hands in front of his face, palms toward Ann as though warding off her words. He shook his head. "No, no. He was dead. Like I said, he was just lying there. He snuck into the trunk of my car and got hisself shot. He trespassed on my private property and I had to get rid of my car because of what he done. I've spent every day of my life since then waiting for someone to find out. You know what that's like? Every day thinking it might be the last?" He was getting truculent, working to convince himself it was the old man's fault. "Screwed up my life, that's what he done. What was he doing there?"

Ann went on the defensive. "He was sick," she said. "He was a sick old man. He did—sometimes he acted strange."

"You mean he was gone in the head?"

"Yes."

"Well then." Bobby D settled his bulk comfortably in the chair. "Seems to me we could reach an understanding."

"What do you mean?"

He sighed, the good old boy explaining the car problem to the uncomprehending little lady. "You could say I done you a favor. He was gone in the head, no good to nobody. Whatever he done, someone had to clean up. Am I right? Like I had to clean up after he trespassed on my private property." Bobby D had not come far. Some height, some bulk, but I suspected that Debbie would have had no trouble recognizing the Dwayne who belonged to The Snakes because he owned a car. "He's gone, and you didn't have to do nothing. I cleaned up the mess, and hell, it was forty years ago!"

Ann got up and took a couple of steps toward Bobby D, who also stood, waiting for whatever she had in mind. She spit in his face. He flinched but otherwise didn't move. Ann threw words at him. "He was loved! He was my *grandfather*. I loved him! He was not a sick old man to *me*. He was good and kind and he *did* things for me, and you took him away from me! He never left me; you *took* him!"

They were almost toe-to-toe, Ann shaking with her anger and weeping, half the size of Bobby D, who stood with his head bowed as though contemplating her words. "Good," he said. He nodded and then again: "Good."



She had to reach to do it, but she hit him. A haymaker that rocked him and resounded in the little room. I stepped closer, but he never moved except to say "okay," in the same way he'd spoken before, and it suddenly occurred to me that he saw her abuse as punishment. After forty years he was being punished for the crime. I didn't tell him there was a little more to it than that. Frank's arrival, at that moment, with an officer of the law did, I think, cause Bobby to wonder about his understanding of legal procedures.

The good weather had ended. Soft rain was now the order of the day as Ann and I sat back in the trees and watched the activity down in the ravine. They didn't mess around: the car was wrapped in cable, and then the winch started to take up the slack, and all of the deep silence in the ravine was gone in the shouts of men and the whine of machinery as the old car was pulled, protesting, away from the earth, the steel cables pulling it up stronger than the blackberry cables holding it down.

The old man's bones were where Bobby D had said, buried deep for fear of discovery by three sweating, terrified boys. They were neatly wrapped and waiting in the trunk of a police cruiser up on the power line road. Eventually, all of the remains were neatly packed and trundled off to be used in deciding the remainder of Bobby D's life.

Ann spoke for the first time since we'd started watching the process of removal. "Thank you for bringing me here. It was a good idea. It closes things for me." She watched the noisy cloud of dust that lumbered toward Whitefork. "Granddad would have laughed," she said. "I'll laugh for him: one more ride in the trunk of a car." And she did laugh.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

"Hide-and-go-seek or no hide-and-go-seek, I'm It." We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016 (our new address). Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

THE BLACK STAIN

D. A. McGuire



Illustration by Rachel Stuart

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/99

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“He’s all right, isn’t he? Not the overly . . . inquisitive type, I hope?”

“Fred Andersen? About as inquisitive as a bar of soap.” Nodding for her to take the comfortable studio chair in front of his desk, Jake Valari took a seat in the old fashioned wooden chair behind it.

She was nervous, though the type who’d try to conceal it, probably succeed. It didn’t pay in her business to be unduly anxious about anything. Just the same, she immediately set up a steady drumming with her long, pale fingernails on the chair’s wooden arm. For a moment it was the only sound between them as he studied her.

She’d just come in out of the rain dressed in an expensive suede jacket, gold-colored with trousers to match, and a skin-tight black turtleneck jersey. The cheap plastic parka he’d hung on the door had protected her shoulder-length dark brown hair, but she’d need a suede brush, the kind with metal teeth, to take the rain spots out of her jacket and pants. He wondered if she owned such a thing. He also wondered what she was doing here, ten o’clock at night in a pouring rain, smelling like—like what? Like the marsh.

He glanced down at her shoes, or boots. Like workmen wear, but he knew a lot of fashionable women also wore boots. They didn’t go with the suit, but neither did the plastic parka. The boots were covered with mud.

“I think . . .” She was calming down a bit, the drumming of her fingers slower; she cocked her head at the door. “He was reading. A *TV Guide*?”

Small talk? He’d go along.

“Probably. Or an encyclopedia. Doesn’t take much to occupy Fred. Like I said, he’s about as dull as dishwater. You didn’t interest him. He’ll forget he ever saw you, but ask him what was on last night’s Discovery Channel and he’ll talk your ear off about the mating habits of East African wildebeest. Why are you here, Carrie? I got your call. You said you wanted to speak to me alone.”

She exhaled deeply, looked straight ahead. Mid-thirties now, he figured, a goodlooking woman without makeup, a rarity these days. Dark eyes, dark lashes, dark brows, but skin as pale as alabaster. Attractive but too thin, though he remembered her as a somewhat heavy, strongly built girl twenty years ago. She’d been quiet, a good student, the perfect daughter, until things changed almost overnight. She’d lost some weight, discovered makeup, and gained a reputation as a wild girl running with the wrong crowd. Out of control her parents had called her then.

“So I’m it, Jake? No other business tonight? If this were L.A., the place’d be hopping.”

“It’s not L.A., Carrie. This is Manamesset, Cape Cod, middle of the week—and middle of November. All you get here is me and Fred, and one car out patrolling the empty cottages on Old Bay

Road. We're lucky if we've got a population of five hundred in this part of town."

"I'd forgotten how dead Manamasset is in winter or fall." She was calming down considerably; her hands gripped both arms of the chair now, nervously but still.

"You haven't answered me, Caroline. Quiet as it is, I've got work. Fred's got work." He tried not to smile; she tried not to respond to it with one of her own.

"I trust you, Jake. You know that, I always have. You called when Dad died, and my mother, too. And you look out for Aunt Minnie—don't deny it, I know you do. In fact, that's why I'm here. Because I trust you."

"That's quite a compliment, Carrie, coming from one of the biggest—"

She cut him off sharply like it was old habit. "I know who and what I am, Jake," then instantly, regretting it said, "I'm sorry. I don't run the show here. This might be a small town in the middle of nowhere from my point of view, but it's your town and your show. I'll try to remember."

"Always self-correcting. Fix it yourself before someone else can do it for you."

"I walked here. I'm at the Blue Goose. I can't afford to have my car—my rental car—be seen outside a police station, even in a small town like this. I came across the marsh."

Was she trying to make a point? He guessed so. The Blue Goose, just about the only motel in the area that stayed open year-round,

was a good three miles from the station but less than a mile if one cut across the marsh.

At night. In the dark. A tricky venture when he was a kid, but he realized that if he had to do it now he probably could. They hadn't moved the tracks or taken down the iron framework that once supported the town's water tower. The tides had shifted and moved a few other landmarks around, and the ditches—a quick reckoning in his head told him it was low tide, the perfect time to traverse a saltwater marsh if somebody felt they had to.

Apparently she felt she had to.

"I went out the back of the motel across the parking lot, through the pines, and over the marsh." She shrugged. "Hasn't changed, the tower's still there in the woods by the marsh—well, except for the water tank on top. Do you remember when some friends and I tried to climb it?" She didn't wait for his answer. "No big deal. But I'm telling you how I got here so you'll know how important this is to me. I can't take a single chance."

"Chance of what, Carrie? Being seen? Is someone—" This next question struck him as just about the most ludicrous thing he'd ever asked anyone, anyone like her, that is. "—bothering you?"

"If that's all it was!" she half laughed. "I could handle that! A jilted boyfriend, a disgruntled employee—even a late or lost shipment to account for and, believe me, I've had my share, well, I could handle it, Jake. I've my resources, individuals who—" She stopped,

stared at him, and he watched her eyes grow hard, like small black marbles. "No one bothers me, Jake, that I don't want to be bothered by, except for . . ." Her voice faded off; her eyes were distant but only for a moment. Suddenly they flashed back at him. "But this is different, and bigger than anything I can handle alone."

"Hard to believe. The way I hear it, you've got a reputation that, well, is formidable, okay?"

"Half what you hear about me is lies, the other half mostly exaggeration. I own twelve different businesses in L.A. Some import-export stores, a couple of car-washes, a diner, a laundromat, even a used car dealership, but all are legit. I swear it. I pay taxes. I have a payroll of over a hundred. I've diversified, which is okay, because—"

"Because the thirteenth business you own is the important one, right? The one the other twelve exist to launder cash through?"

"Jake—" There was a sudden intensity in her voice. "I knew this wasn't going to be easy, and chances are you wouldn't believe me, but I'm here for only one reason, because I trust you. You're the only one I do trust." Both hands were motionless now, grasping the arms of the chair so tightly her knuckles were bone-white. "I want out, Jake, that's why I'm here. I want out of the business. And I can't do that without someone's help—your help, Sergeant Valari."

He realized he'd been slowly leaning forward, interested, no—

curious, but now he fell back so hard in his chair it rocked backwards on its casters, nearly hitting the wall behind him. If she'd told him she was engaged to one of the Kennedys he couldn't have been more surprised—or shocked.

But he was a fast recoverer and, even in a backwater town like Manamesset, had learned to take surprises like this one with a grain of salt. Just the same, he sat forward, pushed down on the intercom on his desk, and addressed the officer on desk duty outside. "Fred, if there's any coffee left, want to bring it in? The whole carafe—oh, and two clean mugs, if you don't mind."

"You must have a thousand questions for me, but I'm asking you to be patient and let me talk first." She was out of the chair, moving across the room slowly, not so much agitated now as with a sense of relief. He could see her face relax, the tightness around her eyes and mouth dissolve. "I've been thinking about this for months, no, years, realizing that I couldn't do it forever. Maybe a lot of us think that way, those who do this kind of work. Maybe not. I'm not sure. I do know one thing, in my business there's no such thing as trust. Anyone, at any time, can put the screws to you, betray you, steal from you, lie to you."

"There are a lot of legitimate businessmen who could say the same."

"Really?" She smiled briefly, and he remembered the shy twelve-

year-old girl she'd been when he'd been—how old? Nearly twenty? Entering the academy, yes. How was it he could remember her then, just before she'd gone wild and started running with the gang that controlled the high school drug market, which back then amounted to little more than booze, prescription drugs, the occasional small stash of marijuana.

Maybe because he'd known her father, a capable and hardworking carpenter and handyman. That was it, his first recollection of her. His parents had been putting an addition on their house and hired Matt Drew; she had been the small dark-haired girl who accompanied her father, carrying his bag of nails, handing him hammers and screwdrivers.

"But it's always been with me, Jake, that I can't do this forever. And it's not that I think what I do is intrinsically bad. Look, I've had enormous success. We both know it. And I'm virtually untouchable—we both know that, too, or at least I hope you do."

"You mean untouchable by the law."

"You know how I mean, Jake."

"That a vague threat?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound too ironic, "because if I recall, it was you who just asked me for help."

Her response was angry.

"People want my product. I give them what they want. That's how I've always justified myself. I try to make no moral judgments on anyone. But I don't want to do it any more, and though I can't explain it to you any more than I

can to myself, that's only part of the reason I'm here like this."

She sighed and ran her hand through her hair.

"There's something you should see right now. I wasn't sure I was going to show you this, but maybe I need to." She put her hand in the pocket of the rain-speckled trousers and pulled out what looked like a handkerchief or scarf.

It was ragged round the edges, maybe a piece of torn pillowcase or bedsheet. There was a dark smudge in the middle, some kind of bright red design. She unfolded it and laid it in the middle of his desk beside the half-empty carafe and coffee mugs.

A white piece of cloth about eighteen inches square, in the center of it a large red blotch, thicker and darker in the middle and thinning out toward the edges into a series of dots. Suddenly Jake knew what it was. He looked up at her.

"Yes. Blood. Supposedly human though I doubt it, probably chicken, maybe dog. Supposedly from the last victim who didn't toe the line, who didn't behave. Remember those things they used to give us in grade school? I have a few friends with kids on the West Coast; they call them 'progress reports' now, even if your kid isn't making very much progress. But we called them warnings." A deep sigh as she looked at the thing, then up at him. "This is a warning, Jake, *and* a progress report. It says that certain people are . . . unhappy with my 'progress,' and that I'd better 'improve' real fast."

"Thought you said you were un-

touchable, Carrie Anne." He heard the sarcasm in his voice, didn't care.

"I am, from people like you who represent the law, but not from those who run the business. No one is."

"Then what is this? Not a warning," he clarified. "It's a threat."

She smiled again, but it was insipid, or ironic, depending on the light, which in this small office was pretty bad.

"It was hanging on my Aunt Minnie's clothesline two days ago. She brought it in. She said it must have been some kids in the neighborhood. They've been bothering her again." She turned her back on him, walked toward the door. "But it wasn't meant for her. It was meant for her to give me. That's how it works. In L.A. they call it the bloodmark, a none-too-subtle way of reminding people of their responsibilities. I'm being 'reminded,' though I've done nothing they should be . . . concerned about."

She turned sharply on her heel. There was mud everywhere across the floor; the bottom of both pants' legs were muddy, too, and wet. "There's also another name for it. A friend—no, an associate of mine, he got one, oh a month or so ago. He showed it to me and laughed about it. He called it the 'red stain.' I told him it wasn't funny, that he ought to take it seriously. You see, he was skimming or under-reporting profits, however you want to look at it. Anyhow, a week later he got another one. He still laughed, what

a fool. They found him floating in the Pacific Ocean two days later without his head."

"Is this what—"

"No. No, Jake, I made my decision long before this, and believe me, I've done nothing they could suspect. I've taken no funds; I've set nothing aside. I've run the business as usual." She shook her head. "I've spoken to no one, intimated nothing . . . nothing, I swear it. They have no cause to be upset with me. Except . . ."

"Except?"

"I've come home and I've been home for nearly two weeks. I came last spring, too, for a funeral, if you . . . remember; I think I saw you outside the funeral home." She waited for confirmation, got none. "I told friends, and other people who need to know, that I just wanted to come home for a while, see my aunt. She's been through a lot. I thought she might need me. Anyhow, I have a laptop in my motel room, and I've stayed in touch and made the decisions I should, kept up my contacts, and . . ." She put both hands to her head. "Unless they can read my mind, they have no idea that I'm leaning in another direction. If they did know, I wouldn't be getting a little progress report." She stepped forward, looking down at him, at the bloodstained rag on the desk. "And this wouldn't be a red stain but a black one, blood mixed with oil or gunpowder, whatever." Yet another shrug, but this time he saw the tremble in it.

"The black stain: that's what they send you right before . . ."

She left it unsaid, but the look in her wide, dark eyes said it all.

"In fact, this is considered an honor." Her voice was just a little higher-pitched suddenly, a measure of her fear, though she probably wasn't aware of it. "It signifies how important I am to them. If I were just some bit player, they'd get rid of me without any warning at all."

"You shouldn't be talking to me. You should be at the district attorney's office, in L.A."

"Cutting a deal with them?" She shook her head, wide, almost wild disbelief in her eyes. "Are you serious? Do you know how long I'd last if I did that? There's corruption everywhere, Sergeant Valari, and though I know damn well who I can't trust, I have no idea who I can. Especially in L.A."

"Carrie." He shook his head. "If this is what you really want, let me help you this way, by making a few calls—here, and—"

"No. One word to anyone in authority and my name goes back—back to my people and then I'm gone. I'm another homicide report on someone's desk. You'll find me floating in Manamesset Bay, not just headless but gutless, too. You have no idea—"

"Hell, Carrie, I cannot believe there's no one you can—" He saw the rigid fear in her eyes and face; there was no disguising it now. "What about the press? Once you come out with your story—"

"Jake, I'm not some small, unimportant—" She turned away, settled slowly into the chair. "Let me explain it to you this way.

There are too many people I can take down with me. Businessmen. Celebrities. Powerful people, heads of giant corporations. Men and women sprinkled here and there throughout state and city government. Even in the criminal justice system. There can't be a deal because there can't be protection for me, and I won't go live in a log cabin in Alaska somewhere, always depending on someone's good will, integrity, and loyalty, because I can't be sure that I'd never be found. I want out but not that way." She swallowed deeply.

"The Feds, the Witness Protection—"

Again a defiant shake of her head.

"No, Jake. Aren't you listening? I had a friend who did that. She's gone, too—a new life and identity? I don't think so. I think they lost her. They—the Feds lost her, though there's never going to be any way to prove it, is there? No, I just want out, simply out, with only you and me and no one else knowing."

"It's not possible, Carrie Anne."

"Yes, it is. It is," she insisted, moving closer to him, to the edge of the chair, but she kept her pose, her back ramrod straight. "If you kill me, Jacob, that's what I'm asking. You—you're perfect. We were not friends, and you picked me up several times when I was young, before I went away. Drinking. Speeding. A vandalism charge. I even hit you once, do you remember? But I got off because supposedly you called me a

stupid slut." A grim smile. "Well, the judge believed me."

He was shaking his head.

"Yes. You, sergeant, you're the only one I'll deal with, and I'll make it worth your while. If you kill me, I'll give you something you've wanted for a long time."

He sat back studying her and, cigarette in hand, went over what else he knew about her.

A good girl. From a good family. Stable. Two parents. No brothers or sisters.

Nice home down by the water, Little Icy Bay section of town. Father a carpenter. Mom stayed at home. Also lived with the father's unmarried sister, Minerva Drew, in her eighties now. Jake knew her, looked in on her from time to time, one of the older folks the police, the local mail carrier, the milkman kept tabs on because there was no one else who would.

Twenty years ago Caroline Anne Drew had been a good girl but quiet, a loner, often seen moving across the marshes at low tide, picking up crabs, dead gulls, burying them in her parents' back yard. Alone. Almost always alone. Not just friendless, but friendless by choice. But still, a good girl.

And a strong swimmer. He remembered that. Swam at the Y, then gave lessons in Little Bay to tourists, locals, kids younger than she. Not merely a strong swimmer, a powerful swimmer for her size. Now as an adult she was thin, of average height and build, but under the expensive suede suit he had no doubt the arms and legs

were still sinuous and strong. Her eyes flashed up at him. Maybe she knew what he was doing. Summing her up. Looking for a flaw. Looking for the con. Looking for the reason a powerful figure in an immense criminal network would be here on a night like this, making such a fantastic proposal—to him. Him, Jake Valari, smalltime cop in a small-time town.

What else did he remember?

Good student in school until about seventh or eighth grade. Puberty. Then she plumped up. Was nearly obese, which instead of ruining her skills as a swimmer only enhanced them. She could have been a marathon swimmer, had great endurance, stamina, and strength. Swimming out to Smiley's Island like it was a jaunt across a millpond. Crossing powerful currents that had swept more than one daredevil teenage boy out to sea. Yes, the extra weight had only added extra insulation and the muscles; he remembered her arm-wrestling a bigger fellow at a local fast-food place, taking him down and out to the cheers of a rowdy high school crowd.

He recalled a photo he'd seen in the local paper after she'd won a local swim meet: an average-looking bulky girl with enormous legs and arms. That girl was no more. That girl who had been teased and tormented in junior high had changed by high school and although still slightly overweight had become the overly madeup, miniskirted flirt he had

picked up time and time again. Carrie Drew, the only girl in the toughest gang in town, caught tipping over gravestones, throwing eggs at local stores they'd been ejected from, trespassing on private property, stealing boats, emptying lobster pots. She was the only girl caught with a bag of pot in ninth grade. Suspended once, twice, three times in the same year.

Her parents had been at a loss to explain, to understand. Coming to the police station with frightened, apologetic looks in their eyes. Coming to bail out a daughter they'd never abused, neglected, or even humiliated. Coming to rescue the daughter they loved. The daughter who eventually dropped out of high school and was married at nineteen to one of the biggest drug dealers on the upper Cape. He'd divorced her by the time she was twenty-one, at which time she'd disappeared. Then, to everyone's surprise but Jake's, she'd surfaced in California, working the business end of her ex-husband's new West Coast interests.

Carrie had been a girl who was going places. Today he was looking at a woman who had arrived, survived, and apparently come full circle, returning twenty-two years later with one goal in mind—to kill off the girl, the woman, she'd once been. To escape twenty years of mistakes.

"Impossible," he said, unlit cigarette dangling from his fingers. "Crazy. And even illegal."

"Not impossible, and not even

crazy." She held her coffee mug delicately in two hands and met his gaze, dark eyes to his faint blue. "As for being illegal, I can compensate for that. I can give you something you want very much."

"I can turn you in now—"

"No, you can't. On what charge? I've done nothing."

"I knew you were coming tonight; for all you know, I've wired this room."

"What judge authorized that in what record amount of time?" she half-laughed. "I called you an hour ago, didn't even tell you who I was. You're lying. You're also afraid, aren't you? I never thought I'd see old Bulldog Valari afraid of anything."

Bulldog, an old nickname, because once he got hold of something he didn't let go. The local kids had given it to him when he'd started here as a fresh-faced naive young cop twenty years ago.

"What can you . . ." he paused, sounding, he knew, like a cop from a black and white, forties-era film noir, "possibly give me that would make me even consider this stupid idea of yours?"

"Two girls disappeared from this town a year ago and turned up later with some creep in Florida. He'd connected with them over the Internet, hadn't he?"

"We closed that scam down," he snapped. For a moment he hated the sight of her—drugs, gambling, even prostitution, yes, but to think she might be involved in something as slimy as online porn made him sick. He'd throw her out now

or arrest her, lock her up, and damn the reason why if he for a moment . . .

"You think that kind of thing just folds up and goes away because you catch one creep?" she said, her face and demeanor strangely calm suddenly.

"He was a loner, Carrie, one guy by himself, luring two susceptible girls—"

"Yeah, two susceptible, lonely, somewhat unattractive, overweight girls. Did you see their pictures in the paper? I did. I read all the papers, even the local ones. I have them sent to me." She lowered her eyes and he remembered that part of her, how the plain, heavy girl had, within a few short months, metamorphosed into a beautiful dark-eyed girl able to lure almost any boy or man into her coy little traps.

Including her father, always willing to dole out the bail money, give her one more chance. The judges whose shoulders she had cried on. And the cops, even his first, late chief, a good man but one he knew she'd blackmailed into releasing her after she'd been picked up during a drug bust. The evidence conveniently disappeared. She'd known too much about the chief, that he enjoyed his mary-jane, as it was called then, with a short beer in the early evening. Well, of course she'd known; it had been her boyfriend who supplied the chief, hadn't it?

But though she had manipulated her way around most men she came up against, she had never taken him. Why was that?

She settled back in the chair, cup nestled between her fingers.

"Yeah, Jake, maybe that was it. Seeing myself in my own hometown paper. Made me sick." She turned the mug in her fingers, studying the coffee as if she were a gypsy and could read the future in its murky surface. "I don't know. I'm not trying to figure that part out. Neither am I here to stop a bad guy." Another clever grin. "It's just my offering, an appropriate one. After you kill me, you'll find in my laptop everything you need to go after, convict, and put away a whole ring of these nasty guys who use the computer revolution to prey on lonely teenage girls and boys."

"A porn network." Not a question.

She took it as one. "Yes, a monstrous one. You can't imagine. But neither could I." A delicate shrug of shoulders that never were delicate. The muscle mass was still there, and the strength. "I didn't know about it, or perhaps I preferred not to know. I just took care of my business; it's the best way to survive. But I'm only human. I found out, not that anyone cared. It brings in millions of dollars a year, mostly in pictures, so who am I to quibble with such success? Keeps a lot of families fed. It's just that once in a while someone—makes a mistake."

"There are other ways to make a living, Carrie."

"I knew you'd have to say that. Yeah." She set the empty mug down.

"So you take me out, Jake, and

I'll give you my disks. They'll be all yours."

"And when your side comes to take me out?"

"They won't." A wry, generous smile. "You're one of the good guys. They don't do that. Revenge only works on one of our own. Sometimes we lose. And with this one, they'll probably turn right around, give all of them to you, and protest they didn't know it was happening. It makes for pretty bad press. People might snort coke, but they like to make sure their own kids are tucked safe in bed at night."

"They'll cut off their own right arm—"

"Yeah," she half laughed, sounding like the cocky, teenage girl he'd thrown into the back of his police car more than once. "To keep the whole animal from dying. But if it makes you nervous, just hand over everything, the laptop and all my disks, to someone else: state authorities, the FBI. Who cares? Declare it was too hot for you to handle, and maybe it is. You'll still get the satisfaction of knowing you put a lot of sickos away. And for you I'd think that would be enough."

"I think you're crazy, Carrie Anne. I think you've finally lost it."

"Aunt Minnie said the same thing just before she threw me out. Oh—" A bolt forward, legs came down hard in front of her. "Not over this—over a family situation. Minnie doesn't know about any of this. We had an argument out on the front lawn, and she said she never wanted to see me

again. A neighbor saw it, too, the Sawyer woman, and her kid. Which in a kind of way is good; they're witnesses. But after I die, I can't go back, Jake. Ever. I'm going to be dead to everyone, including Aunt Minnie."

He shook his head.

"Except for you. You'll be the only one who knows the truth. That's going to be the hardest part. Funny." Another half laugh. "That I'm asking you."

"You're crazy," he muttered.

She ignored him. "I have my whole future outlined. I'm just walking away from it all. Bank accounts, life insurance, everything that belongs to me, it just goes. I'll let the lawyers work it out—their lawyers, what Minnie gets, what she doesn't. They'll probably watch her for a while, but they'll find nothing because nothing is going to follow me."

"Oh come on, Carrie, you've prepared something. Let me guess, some secret Swiss bank account?"

"No, not a dime. I could wait tables the rest of my life and be happy. Nothing. There's never again to be any trace of Caroline Anne Drew, not on the face of this planet. She'll be dead, buried in the family plot outside Sandwich. Minnie will grieve—or celebrate in her own way. A handful of cousins might show up. Or not. And maybe one or two friends from L.A., though I doubt it. But they'll never doubt I'm dead. I'll never go back, not even for my dogs, my cats—nothing. I'm walking off a pier and never looking back."

"Is that how you plan to do it—walk off a pier? I thought you wanted me to kill you."

"Look how thin I am, Jake." She stood up suddenly, taking off the suede jacket, putting it over the back of the chair. Indeed she was thinner than he'd ever seen her, anorexic almost, though under the black jersey he could see she'd kept up her physique: arms full of muscles that rippled. On a body with ribs poking out.

"No one knows I was working out, except for him and, like I said, he was found floating in the bay. I have a gym at home, nothing fancy, just enough."

She sighed.

"I want you to shoot me. You were a sharpshooter, weren't you? I want you to shoot me—" She indicated her midsection. "As close to the heart as you can."

"Carrie—"

"From a distance. With witnesses. On the water. I'll have a vest on. You do this for me, and you'll get what I promised."

"A vest."

"Yeah, I picked a couple up. A shipment we had. You shoot me, the impact knocks me into the water. I go into the currents at the mouth of the canal. They'll drag me into the rocks. I'll drown, Jake, and we both know a body will come back up, maybe a day or two later, somewhere down the canal. And by the time they find the body, it'll be so badly mangled—"

"You can't be serious."

"I want Minnie to identify me. She has to identify me. There can never be any doubt."

"You're—" he muttered an expletive—"serious."

Again she ignored him. "She'll think it's me, Jake, trust me. Of course it won't be. But it doesn't matter. She'll be dressed just like me. She'll be the same size and height and weight. She'll be wearing my clothes, even the same vest you shoot at." She put her hand on her chest, right over her heart. "You can do that, can't you? Shoot me and blow me off the boat?" She saw but ignored his incredulous expression. "After being battered by the currents and the rocks in the canal, she'll be cut up badly."

"You *are* crazy. I ought to arrest you right now; you're planning to kill someone to take your place."

"No. I'd never do that. She's already dead."

"Already dead?"

"I suppose I should've told you that first. I bought her, Jake."

"You bought . . ."

"Cash." She was smiling, but there was no amusement in her face. "We found her . . . that is, I found her down in Mexico, in a smalltown morgue. It was an accident, finding her, like she was sent from heaven."

Silence suddenly. So much silence the room was thick with it. A clock ticking on a wall. A scuffle of a muddy boot across the floor. The creak of a floorboard as someone shifted in a chair.

Finally she spoke, knowing, as he did, that as incredible as was everything she'd told him up to now, this was the most incredible. "They were going to sell her to

a medical school in Mexico City, but I offered them more." She sank back into the chair, a tight-lipped grin on her thin-lipped mouth. "Have I told you enough for you to lock me up? If so, I might as well tell you the rest, right?"

"You bought a body." It seemed as though he had to say it twice, maybe three times, to make it sound real. "You *bought* a body—from a morgue in Mexico?"

"Imagine how I felt when I showed up there, not to identify *her* but one of our, well, I'd like to say associates." A one-shouldered shrug. "He was always a loose cannon anyhow, too much drink, too much wine, women, and song. He had a heart attack in a whorehouse. I was asked to go down and make the arrangements for shipping him back." A half grin. "Well, it was appropriate, wasn't it? That's my specialty, import-export.

"When I walked into the morgue they took me into the wrong room, the attendants did. They just assumed I was there to pick her up—because she, and pardon me for the bad pun, because she was a dead ringer for me. They thought I was her sister or some other relative. Even Franco . . ." She paused, smiled, shook her head. "Even the friend I was traveling with was surprised. Just like me, he said. Same face, same cheekbones, same long dark hair. The only difference between us was that she was dead. They found her floating in a river. Cause of death, drowning—after a heavy

bout of drinking, which works perfect for me. Minnie will vouch that I like my liquor."

He could think of nothing to say as she went on. "They get girls like her by the dozen down there, itinerant whores and small-time prostitutes. She could have been part Indian; could have been a light-skinned Mexican. No one knew her name. She carried no I.D., nothing. The local authorities had tried to find out who she was, but no one had come forward to claim her. They'd had her on ice a couple of weeks, were getting ready for authorization to sell her to a medical college."

"But you bought her instead."

"The dead don't bother me, they never have. I sometimes think I'd have been a natural working in a funeral home, touching up their hair, putting on their makeup. Someone's got to do it."

"Where is she now?"

"You know I can't tell you that; just let me assure you she hasn't been mistreated. She's going to a gentler place than she would've in Guadalajara or Mexico City. She was already past caring, and no one wanted her. Here she's going to be put to rest in a beautiful cemetery overlooking Manamesset Bay and given the respect in death that, maybe, she never got in life. Is that a crime?"

"Listen, Carrie, just suppose—just suppose—" again he had to say it twice to make it sound real—"I went along with all this, this body isn't you. And even if you could fool your aunt, you won't fool anyone else. The medical exam-

iners will need proof of who you are."

"There'll be positive identification—by you, by Minnie. They'll find my license, everything, on me. They won't check anything else, dental records, blood types, all that, because there'll be no doubt who I am. You'll see me fall into the water and two, three days later I'll come up again—or rather she will—somewhere on the east side of the canal. They'll do a quick postmortem, then ship me off to the funeral home."

"Tell me where you've got this body and maybe I'll think about it."

"Hell, sergeant, do you think I was born yesterday?"

"You've brought a dead body—illegally—into this country, I can damn well—"

"Stop talking like a cop, Jake Valari, and start acting like someone who cares, which I know you do. I read what you said about the guy who lured those girls all the way to Florida. I'm going to hand over to you—a dozen like, no, maybe a hundred like him—no, not like that guy but worse than that guy because they haven't been caught yet, Jake, and possibly a lot of them never will get caught, unless—"

She had found his weak spot, his vulnerable center, just as she had with the judge, the late chief, and even her own father.

She also knew that if he refused she could turn and walk away and it would be as if this whole wild and incredible conversation had never happened.

"The girl's dead, Jake. She was going to be cut up by third-rate medical students at a third-rate medical college in Mexico. I didn't kill her, and the police down there didn't care. We paid our fees, and she was signed over to us, nice and legal. Maybe there were a few others we had to pay off, but it's done with. We bought a second casket, sent her to L.A. with our . . . associate. From there—well, let's just say she's traveled a thousand miles marked as frozen food."

He couldn't believe he was going to ask this, but he did. "Was she embalmed?"

"'Course not, just kept on ice." She was starting to get impatient. "Look, Jake, we're going to do this in broad daylight. Minnie will say it's me. You'll say it's me. And a dozen people will see me get shot and fall off the boat."

"Into the currents at the mouth of the canal."

"And when they pick me up, they'll say that though the police vest protected me I got caught in the currents and drowned. Right by the Maritime Academy." She was smiling now.

"I don't care what kind of swimmer you used to be, you fall in that water this time of year, we *will* be pulling you up on the east side of the canal."

"It's a chance I'll take."

He heard himself say, "Tell me why I'm going to shoot you."

"Because I'm going to be in a boat full of cocaine—and I'll be shooting at you."

He knew by doing so he was

only helping her, aiding the entire story she was setting up, but he did it anyhow: called out to the West Coast to the one person who could help him—a friend who had trained with him twenty years ago, gone west, and was now a well-known police lieutenant working out of vice in a precinct on the south side of L.A. Probably making twice as much as he did, too, Jake thought ruefully. No matter, he'd never have traded the peaceful life of a rural Cape town for what his friend had to deal with every day.

"Caroline Drew. Sure I know who she is. Name comes up every now and then, but not in a big way. She's been investigated, put under surveillance a couple of times, but we never got anything that can solidly link her to the gang we know she's involved with. She's one of their front men, owner of a half dozen small businesses—carwashes, a few sandwich shops, an electronics store, that sort of thing. They help take care of some of the dirty cash flowing through our beautiful city. I even got an interesting story about her. Drug enforcement heard she was setting up some big party, you know the kind—scratch and sniff—for a celebrity bigshot and all his out-of-town guests. They got the warrants, crashed the party—she's got a hell of a place up in the hills. Anyhow, they go in like gangbusters and there she is, serving tea and fruit punch to the ladies in the Garden Club. They were playing charades, Jake! She had the last laugh on us. I even

think she might have set us up herself to teach us a lesson. She's got powerful friends. She covers for them, and they protect her. She's also an animal lover, which endears you to half the people in this city who are powerful or think they are. Contributes heavily to animal relief, PETA, city kennels, and animal shelters. So—" A slight pause; essentially the voice on the other end of the line was wondering why he was offering so much for so little. "Why are you asking? Most of this you already know, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Look, if you've got something on Carrie Drew, we'd greatly appreciate knowing about it here. Not that we don't want her—we'd take her if we could—but more important, she's a link to a lot of much bigger players. A small link maybe, but enough to pull the chain apart. She knows things, of that we're positive."

"Porn networks?" There was no response on the other end. "Involving children?"

A long sigh. "There's been talk of it. All this Internet crap. You got a lead there?"

"No. No, she's just out here visiting relatives, and I'm checking up on her, like any good cop would do."

"You think she's spreading her influence, or theirs, to the East Coast? We'd like to know if that's the case."

"No, but—" It was on the tip of Jake's tongue to say it: "Any hint that she might be looking for a way out? You ever hear anything

like that?" But he didn't say it; he kept it to himself as he thanked his old friend, then hung up the phone.

"She had to be crazy . . ." he said to himself, spitting out his half-smoked cigarette, stomping it dead on the decaying asphalt. Then he turned to stare across the marsh. "... to think I'd even consider . . ."

Not that the deal she'd offered hadn't been intriguing; she had known what bait to use on him. Still, only a fool got hooked by that kind of fish story. If only she'd come in like most normal snitches did. Make a deal. Accept protection. Disappear. There are people you can trust if you only know where to look. If you tell enough people. If you . . .

What a colossal lie that was, and he knew it; she knew it, too. The crime syndicates were so powerful now they even targeted county and city prosecutors. Why would she feel any safer than one of them?

All the same, he had to make one more try to take her in the right way, risks or not. He had to convince her, and if he couldn't, he'd get a warrant, seize her laptop and disks, do things the hard way. It wouldn't be pretty; it wouldn't be just, not in the absolute sense of justice, but she as much admitted her involvement . . .

He swore, kicked a clod of dirt and asphalt across the lot into the ditch that ran behind it. Black grass swayed in the cool night

wind, and scents of decaying vegetation drifted his way on the ebbing tide. Some people hated the smell of the marsh at low tide; others thought it a scent as sweet as any perfume. Nature's perfect ecosystem, churning life back into itself, making no judgments, casting no lies; this is what you get: the high sweet cry of ospreys in the summer, the low honk of Canadian geese in the fall.

"If you do decide it's no," she had said, her wet parka over her arm, "I'll tell you where she is. Just promise me you'll bury her right."

"Can't," he'd said. "Have to contact the higher authorities, that's how we do things right."

"When can you let me know?" she'd asked.

"I think I already have. The next move is yours."

"You smalltown cops," she whispered. "Should've known. The reason I chose you is the reason you won't do it."

"Didn't say I wouldn't help you, Carrie. I just can't do it this way."

Her eyes lowered as she stood before the door.

"It means a change in plans . . . but I guess it was crazy, wasn't it?" She tried to smile, couldn't. "Give me a day, Jake. Can you do that? I'm not going anywhere. You can put someone on me, watch me round the clock, I swear I won't run. It's just . . ."

So he'd give her exactly one day—one day for her to think about it, and for him, too, to consider how to approach her, before going to those higher up. One day

for her to realize this was the wrong way, and up to now she'd committed no crime . . .

Though transporting a body illegally into the U.S. had to rate up there as one, no matter how good her intentions had been—in the long run, that is. Then again, she might have been lying. He had to consider that, too.

Yes, being a cop for over twenty years had taught him to be like Carrie Drew in one way: be careful who you trust. There was just one small shade of a difference between her and him, he did trust—perhaps only a careful, select few, but in his profession one couldn't survive long being suspicious of everyone.

So he already had the list in his head; first the captain, tell him everything tomorrow morning. Lay it right on him—and on his desk. Carrie had left the red-stained scarf; he'd start with that. From there, both he and the chief would go to the district attorney; he in turn would make the necessary legal arrangements to go to Carrie's motel, seize the laptop and her disks, and find out where she'd hidden the corpse she'd intended to use . . .

He shuddered, looked down at the still unlit cigarette between his fingers.

Chief due back in eight hours—had been on a "weekend honeymoon" with his new young wife, a widow he'd met on an earlier case through Jake. They'd flown out to Vegas, probably to gamble away her late husband's life insurance settlement.

And the chief was going to ask him why he hadn't taken her in then and there. Even if there was no proof of wrongdoing, a body under her bed at the Blue Goose, for example, why hadn't Jake made something up to hold her for twenty-four hours? Charge her with something, anything. Jaywalking across a salt marsh? No, how about reckless endangerment?

Of herself, for as he stood there thinking it occurred to him that Carrie Drew's biggest enemy had always been herself.

He turned over, angrily reaching for the clock, trying to smash down its off button. It was only three in the morning. He must have set it wrong, and it wouldn't shut off.

Then he realized it was his phone, on the other side of the double bed. With a groan he rolled over to it, nearly banging his head with it as he fumbled it to his ear.

"Valari here," he barked into the receiver. "What's up?"

Fred Andersen's calm, careful voice: "Got a call from Whitey Carson, sergeant. A boat just blew up outside the academy, head of the canal. Coast Guard's insisting it's their jurisdiction, but Whitey got a real good look before he got pushed out of the way."

Whitey Carson, harbormaster for Manamesset Bay. Jake sat up, rubbing his eyes, focusing, thinking.

"Bags floating everywhere according to Whitey. From his de-

scription they sound like good-sized ones, maybe an ounce, ounce and a half each. We also got reports up and down our beaches of an explosion and fire out in the bay. Whitey thinks it was a cabin cruiser, forty footer, one of Jinx Macready's rentals."

"Get hold of Jinx before the Guard or the state police do," Jake barked into the phone gruffly. "Put him in a black and white and take him to the station. Just get to him before anyone else." He fell back into his pillows, head reeling.

"Anything else, sarge?" Fred asked, in his voice just a touch of excitement.

He paused, thinking, thinking, trying to shake the fog of early morning out of his head: a rental, head of the canal, bags floating.

An explosion.

"Carrie," he said. "Caroline Drew."

"Sarge?"

"She's at the Blue Goose. Take her in, too."

"Sarge? For . . . ?"

"Just for questioning. Take her in. And ask her—ask her to bring her laptop with her. You do know what a laptop is?"

"'Course I know it was Carrie Drew who hired the boat," Jinx said irritably, scratching his head under his faded Red Sox baseball cap. "Damn, I'm underinsured as it is. Who's going to insure me now?"

"Your insurance problems don't mean a pile of—" Jake paused, looked at Jinx's waxen face. He

looked positively ghastly; a tall, thin, sickly fellow, always popping pills by the handful, most of which Jake suspected weren't all that legal. And suddenly Jake wasn't sure if this was the hypochondriac fisherman's normal pallor or if Jinx's color had come from some other source, like fear.

"You're sure, Jinx—" Jake said, edging onto the corner of his desk, looking at the man parked in front of it. Fred Andersen was right behind him, hands fixed under his belt, staring at the back of Jinx's head. "—that those plastic bags full of white powder my men are pulling up off Icy Bay Beach aren't yours?"

"Damn, Jake, damn," the man said, stamping his foot for emphasis. "She paid me in cash, all tens and twenties. It's not my stuff, I swear to God it's not my stuff."

"But you knew who she was."

"Hell, yes." He was sweating rivulets by now. "'Course I know Carrie Drew. But I didn't think—"

"You didn't think anything past the thousand bucks she shelled out to you," Jake said casually, almost with a light touch like it was just an everyday occurrence. He stood up, walked around the man, eyeing him carefully. "Old girlfriend shows up, wants to borrow a boat for a few days, pays you a grand up front. You hardly wink an eye, that right?"

"She wasn't my girlfriend." His voice was almost a whine. "Christ, Jake, just because she and me, we ran with the same crowd twenty years ago don't mean—"

Jake was now behind him, lean-

ing over his shoulder, grimacing at the aroma. Fishermen always stink, he thought. He whispered, "You weren't afraid of her, were you? I mean, afraid to tell her no?"

"Hell, Jake, what do you want me to say to you? I ain't got nothing to do with this." He twisted his neck to look up. "Look, a broad offers you a thousand bucks cash to borrow a boat for twenty-four hours? You think I'm gonna say no? What kind of fool do you think I am?"

"I don't know," Jake replied, voice still a whisper. "The kind who'd rent a forty footer to a woman you know is a drug dealer maybe?"

"Hell." Jinx slumped against the metal desk, absolutely green.

"Jake." The capable Fred Andersen was suddenly at his side handing him a sheet of paper. "Chief's on the phone, checking in. Do we tell him about this? Or let him read it in the papers?"

He considered for a minute. The chief was nearly fifty, his new bride less than twenty-five. Young wife, Las Vegas, gambling, shows, and—a young wife. No way would the chief be up for reading anytime soon.

"Let him read about it in the papers." He turned to look back at Jinx Macready.

It hadn't been easy bartering back and forth. The Coast Guard took their authority pretty seriously: overseeing the canal and anything, legal or otherwise, that moved through it. Still, even this man had to agree that since the

boat came from a local citizen, one Jared "Jinx" Macready, resident of Manamesset, and since plastic bags of white powder were drifting up on Manamesset beaches, cooperation was the best route.

Looked better in the papers, too, now that a Channel 34 news truck from a local cable station was parked outside the Coast Guard station just south of the Bourne Bridge.

It seemed that one of those "citizen reporters" the stations advertise so heavily for had sent in a videotape of the burning boat from his house on Icy Bay; another had called the station reporting that "bags of white stuff, probably cocaine" were washing up all over the place.

Yes, cooperation was definitely the way to go.

"We would really like to speak to—" The Coast Guard captain, face as crisp and starched as his white uniform and immaculate, gold-braided cap, leaned forward toward Jake over his desk. "—this Mr. Jared Macready, sergeant."

"Well, he's in protective custody at this time," Jake answered, sitting back, watching the sun come up just behind the man's left shoulder. Indeed, the man had a stunning view of the canal, the forested banks on either side, over which a brilliant gold sun was pouring what feeble light it could muster on a cold November dawn. "Though I think he could be released for questioning in return for a little cross-cooperation, admiral."

"Captain," the man corrected him but not without a smile.

Flatter them to death, Jake thought.

"What," he folded his hands on his desktop, "do you want to know, sergeant?"

"Everything."

"Everything," the man echoed with an ingratiating smile. He wanted to remind this self-important, smalltown, slightly rotund police officer—or detective sergeant if his title could be believed—who he was, where he was and what respect was due his rank, position, and authority.

And he might have, too, except for the phone call he'd received just minutes before the detective had pulled up in his outrageous fire-engine red Pontiac Firebird.

Jake Valari? the caller had barked. Give him what he wants. If who we think was aboard that boat *was* aboard that boat, we need all the information the local authorities can give us.

Of course Captain Abraham Stuart of the United States Coast Guard had made a rather pathetic attempt to argue. "But surely, sir, this is our jurisdiction—"

"Play the game the way Valari wants it!" had been the answer on the other end of the phone. "Then tell me what you find out."

Reluctantly the captain had replied, "Whatever you want, senator," and hung up.

Now he was facing the portly sergeant and telling him, quite factually, "Looks like a gasoline explosion. The kind you'd expect with an inexperienced boater.

Fumes accumulating in the hold. The boat's been ripped apart. Not much left except pieces of fiberglass, none more than a meter long. Life vests. And lots and lots of—" A smile. Jake returned the smile as the captain finished. "—powdered cocaine, uncut. We're not sure of the exact quantity, but we've recovered about twenty one-ounce bags so far."

"And my people another five on the beaches of Manamesset."

"Not counting what we'll never recover." Both their smiles became grim indeed. "But no sign of a body, if that's what you're asking, sergeant. We've found some clothes, a jacket, shoes—all women's, small sizes—oh and a leather handbag, good quality."

"Any I.D.?"

"No, but we think someone was on board just before the explosion. The harbormaster, Mr. Wilford Carson, reported seeing lights and movement on the boat. He was doing what he calls a run-around near the mouth of the canal, even though it's out of his jurisdiction."

"Whitey Carson's a born snoop, probably wondered who was out on a forty footer this time of year, that time of morning, especially on one of Macready's rentals." Jake lowered his eyes conspiratorially, figuring it wouldn't hurt to add, "We've suspected Jinx—Jared Macready—of shifty business before, if you get my drift."

"I get it," the man agreed with a condescending sneer. "Now, sergeant, I've delivered. Is it possible that we can speak with this

—” he looked at a pad of paper on his desk “—Jinx? Macready?”

“I’ll have him sent right over.”

Jake moved to leave, but the captain held him a moment longer. “And may I ask on what possible charge did you lock up this Mr. Macready? Shifty reputation aside, have you any reason to suspect that he’s involved in this explosion? In addition to possible drug charges—this *is* his boat—do you have suspicion of something else going on here? Insurance fraud?”

“Nope, we just held Jinx on a standard DADST,” Jake replied.

“A DADST?”

“A local ordinance,” Jake said. “Stands for ‘doing a damned stupid thing.’”

Just like I’m doing now, or getting ready to do, he thought as he pulled out into traffic, headed around the rotary and into Buzzards Bay, seven o’clock on a blustery November morning. Flags were standing full out as the sun came up over the trees behind the canal.

Doing a damned stupid thing. Or have done a damned stupid thing. Should have reported Carrie’s wild proposition the moment she left the station. Should have put a tail on her, should have kept her in my sights . . .

In my sights. Jake shook his head ruefully, wanting to laugh out loud. Because isn’t that what she’d wanted him to do anyhow—keep her in his sights?

So why blow up the boat the way she had, assuming she had?

Unless she just wanted to get rid of it all, which made absolutely no sense at all. If she’d changed her mind, decided to cut a deal the other way, why not include all that coke with it? Made no sense, so someone else had to be involved . . .

He picked up the radio receiver and called the station, hoping to hear that Fred had dragged Carrie in, that she’d give him some answers even if he had to force them out of her.

He never expected to hear Fred say, “Glad you called in, sarge; just got a report from the Federal Reserve Station down by the canal train bridge. Two fishermen say they think they saw a body drifting by. It’s up against the pilings under the bridge.”

“Body,” Jake heard himself say as he swallowed thickly.

“Yeah, we got a boat going to check. Reserve property is federal government but what the heck—can’t just leave a body there, can we, sarge? I mean, it’s kind of disrespectful.”

“No, sure can’t,” Jake replied, head spinning. “Call the medical examiner—”

“Already done, sarge.”

“And . . . Carrie Drew? Did you bring her in?”

“That’s the other thing I meant to tell you. We can’t find her. She checked out of her room last night. I sent Woody to the aunt’s, but she hasn’t seen or heard from her niece in three, maybe four days.”

He could hear the frustration in the older man’s voice.

It was soon to match his own.

Jake stood in the hotel manager's office, hands on his hips, face showing exasperation, frustration, impatience. The manager, a short, weasel-like fellow, had been more than cooperative but less than helpful. Carrie had checked out late last night, he said, shortly before midnight.

Which was about a half hour after she'd left Jake's office.

Cleared out her room, paid her bill in cash, and gone.

Fred was already checking on the rental car, but Jake thought he knew the answer to that one. It was probably parked at Logan Airport, Boston, or Green in Providence, or maybe at one of the smaller airports: Hyannis, Middleboro across the canal . . .

"Nope," Fred said, looking up from the phone. "It hasn't been turned in. But there's a report of such a car at Icy Bay Beach, in the parking lot."

"What are you saying?" Jake said, thinking out loud although he understood. Things were moving too fast—Carrie Anne Drew, always a step ahead of everyone, including the law, had done it again.

Because just as Fred was saying, "You want me to check it out?," another of his men, in a black and white, lights flashing, siren off, screeched to a halt in the parking lot outside. It was patrol officer Woody Parsons, jumping out of the car and racing to the door, wrenching it open.

"Found a second body, sergeant, this one washed up farther down

the canal on the rocks just south of the Bourne Bridge. And guess what—this one is wearing a wet-suit."

"It's an interesting story, sergeant," Captain Stuart told Jake as he lit his pipe, stepped away into the cool, clear—and chemically unscented—air outside the Manamesset County Morgue. "Woman asks you to kill her—metaphorically speaking, that is—and then she turns up dead along with another body strikingly similar to her own." He turned, confronted Sergeant Valari, hands on his hips, staring out across heavily wooded banks that sloped down to the canal's black-blue water. The wind was whipping up a fast and furious froth as the currents swirled and churned.

It was a beautiful location for a restaurant, a motel, a golf course, Jake had heard people comment. Shame it had to be wasted on a morgue, on people who could no longer appreciate the view.

"My question is this, though it has nothing to do with me and my investigation: why didn't you report this as soon as she told you about it?"

"I used my own judgment," Jake replied softly. "Gave her some time to think it all out, figured she might come in on her own, without—"

"Without resorting to faking her own death? Looks like she panicked, went ahead without you, doesn't it?" The captain almost seemed to be enjoying this. "And then botched it?"

It did seem that way. Jake glared at him, then looked back at the door, left ajar now to let in air. Problem was, the morgue smelled almost as bad as Jinx Macready did, but it was a chemical odor and somehow that was worse than the smell of death itself. Jake could deal with the stink of old fish, the odor of a slowly decaying marsh, but this smell . . . He shifted his weight uneasily.

"Seems she did."

"But not for us to decide that, is it, sergeant? Both women were found on federal property. It's left to others to decide how and why they died."

But Jake already knew what had happened. He didn't need any special "federal inspectors," flown in from God knew where, to tell him what Carrie had tried to do and failed at. He knew this canal; he knew these currents; he knew Carrie. Knew that she had taken that other body and dressed it like herself, then left it while she went down to the galley, filled it with gasoline, then lit it.

Of course, she'd miscalculated, had meant to jump overboard. Carrie's body hadn't been wearing jeans, jersey, a storm jacket, and boots as the Mexican girl's had been. No, Caroline Drew's slim, strong body had been found dressed in a wetsuit but without mask or flippers. She hadn't had time to put them on. The force of the explosion had caught her off-guard and she'd been thrown into the water . . .

Along with a girl who was already dead.

"'Course, you have to live with the fact that if you'd taken her in last night she'd be alive today, now wouldn't she?" Captain Stuart went on, condescension in his voice.

Jake knew what he was probably thinking: smalltown hick cops screw it up again.

Or maybe it was, thank God he messed up, not me. *I* did everything by the book.

Jake realized the captain was correct. Nothing was going right—not for Carrie and certainly not for him or his department. They'd all come out looking like fools. He could have stopped it, and nothing he could do now would fix it.

Jinx Macready had identified the dead woman in the wetsuit, her face and hands badly burned, her suit ripped and torn by the force of the canal currents pushing it against the rocks, as the woman who'd given him a thousand dollars to rent one of his boats. The other woman he didn't know, but it barely mattered.

The other woman was in almost as bad shape—for a corpse, that is. For it hadn't taken the medical examiner long to determine that this woman—the other one who so strongly resembled the one in the wetsuit—had been dead long before being thrown into the canal. She was burned, too, but not as badly as the other; all the same, he had quickly recognized that this dark-haired, pale-skinned woman hadn't been killed by the explosion.

For one thing, she had already been embalmed.

Which is the one thing Carrie had miscalculated, that they had used some embalming fluids on the woman in Mexico. Formalin, the doctor had said, from the smell, but further tests would be more conclusive.

Maybe Carrie had figured that if the body were in the water for a day or two, or if it were torn apart by the force of the explosion, or if it were burned more badly, or . . .

Jake didn't know. He was no chemist or forensic scientist, and neither had she been.

There was a gasp from behind him, and he turned uneasily. Minerva Drew was being helped from the morgue, leaning on the arm of a man in a dark suit. Jake had been with her when she identified Carrie, had seen the old woman's face grow rigid with shock. He'd also heard her whisper, beneath her breath, "Those who live by the sword . . ."

Now she was being helped into a waiting van by her minister and his wife.

"Wouldn't want to be in your shoes, sergeant," the man in the perfect white uniform said. "In fact, you know what I'd do if I were you? Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Jake just looked at him.

"Because why bother? And who knows? I'm surprised you even told me. So she came to you with some crazy offer? She's dead now; what does it matter? In a way, she got what she wanted, didn't she?"

Jake turned to look down at the canal, saying nothing.

"Look, I like you, sergeant," Captain Stuart said, joining Jake, the aroma of his pipe spicy and warm. "Which is something I didn't think I was going to say. I think we can work together on this—and on other cases that might come up in the future. You were honest with me, and I appreciate that. But Caroline Drew is dead, and it's not going to take long for any hotshot federal inspector to figure out how it happened. She died trying to fake her own death. She might even have been alive when she hit the water; they say her lungs were full of water. Oh, of course they'll have to do some work, track down who the other woman was, which they'll probably never figure out, will they? Hell, Carrie Drew could have been lying about her. I just read that a hundred bodies a day get shipped to county and city morgues all over this great country of ours—bodies that go unidentified and are never claimed. She could've picked her up just about anywhere. You can't tell me there aren't morgue attendants—even medical examiners—eager to make an extra buck here and there. And from what I hear, Caroline Drew had more than the extra buck or two."

"Let them find this all out on their own, is that what you're saying?"

"Why not, sergeant? You've got a good job here, a good reputation; why gum it up with the suggestion you didn't do what was legal—or proper? And who's to say it wasn't, anyhow? You gave her twenty-four hours to do it

your way; she just happened to have a different agenda, so to speak."

"You're probably right."

"But it's your decision." He tipped back his cap, looked up at the sun as it started to sink over Manamesset Bay to the southwest. From this vantage point, high on the banks of the canal, they could see the train bridge, the Maritime Academy, lights starting to blink on in Onset. Below and to their right a barge was plugging its way north.

"It seems she had it all planned out, sergeant, even went so far as to steal her own dental records because she knew they'd never match this other corpse. Did you know that?" He turned with a smug grin. "Of course we have no proof she stole them, but L.A. says they're missing. And with a badly burned body, well, she knew we'd have to rely on survivors' identifying her, like her aunt and maybe even you, isn't that right? She probably was going to burn the body's fingers, too, and its face." He shuddered, badly acted. "Gruesome stuff but she was cold-hearted, no doubt about that. Didn't have time for everything, I guess."

Jake took a pad of paper from his back pocket and looked at it. His men had impounded the rental car, a '98 Nissan Maxima that Carrie had left at Icy Bay Beach. There were small private docks all along that beach, most of them empty this time of year. She must have tied Jinx's boat at the end of one of them. He'd have Fred or

Woody ask around, see if anyone saw one of Jinx's boats there.

The captain walked closer, looking down at the pad in Jake's hand.

Before Jake could receive orders not to touch anything, to leave the car for the federal inspectors, his men had gone over it, top to bottom, trunk to wheel covers, and found nothing. Absolutely nothing. Not a trace of drugs. Not one item of personal use. No clothes. No suitcases.

And no laptop computer or disks.

He ripped the paper off the pad, crumpled it in his fist. Then he opened his fingers and let the cool breeze take it off his hand and carry it away toward the water.

"Just one question," the man in white at his shoulder said almost thoughtfully. "I understand she asked you to shoot her, pretend to, that is, and knock her off the boat, which, by the way, it's a good thing you didn't agree to, but what were you going to get out of all of this?"

He turned to face Jake, pipe in hand, his face dark in the fading light. "What did she offer you? I mean, just out of curiosity, if you don't mind telling—"

"Nothing," Jake replied sharply. "Absolutely nothing."

"So it's done, over with." The chief spun around in his chair, away from Jake. "We're out of this one, Jake. You can read the report if you want—on the desk."

He didn't need to. Jake already knew the results of the federal and state investigations. Identi-

fication of body, ninety percent conclusive: Caroline Anne Drew. Cause of death: accidental drowning, the result of trying to falsify her own death. Her body had finally been released to Minerva Drew. Everyone was satisfied.

"Oh, and here's an interesting twist not many people know," the chief said as Jake stood there unmoving. "An empty body bag with Mexican tags washed up on Onset Beach a few days ago. They found hair in it that matched the unidentified body's. Seems Carrie went south to buy herself a corpse."

He half chuckled. "Hell, what money won't buy these days. Of course, Mexico is denying all knowledge of the stiff—don't even want it back."

"So the case is closed," Jake said, more to himself than to the chief.

"Thank God, yes. She was just a small cog in a big machine. Alive she might have been worth something; dead she's nothing," the chief answered brusquely. But with the chief it was always all talk; Jake heard his tone relax, and when he spun around in his chair to confront Jake, he was smiling.

Chief McCalister was not a man who liked trouble, or troublesome cases. It was good that he had someone like Jake Valari in his department to take care of those cases.

"I mean, if she was so eager to disappear. Kind of hard to figure sometimes," the chief went on as he lit a cigarette, then tapped the file folder with one finger. "I've

talked around, Jake, found out she'd been approached several times, both out in L.A., and here. But they couldn't get her to budge."

"Approached?"

"By the Feds, wanting to cut a deal with her. She knew things, things she took with her." He sighed, but it was a sigh of relief. Anything that meant less work or trouble always made the chief happy. "This baby's been put to bed. And speaking of that—" his smile grew wider—"I think I'll cut out early today. You hold down the show here, Jake. The bride's preparing a special treat for me tonight, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah," Jake Valari said, face absolutely deadpan, "I know what you mean."

Put to bed maybe in the chief's mind, but not in Jake's. Oh, the conclusion the "experts" had arrived at was the most logical, and plausible. All the evidence indicated that Carrie'd tried to stage her own death using a corpse bought south of the border and gasoline in place of Jake's sharp-shooting skills.

But there were other scenarios, too, that Jake liked to entertain, including one he had difficulty imagining. It ran a little like this:

Things had moved too swiftly for Jake. Within days the report had made it to the chief's desk, which was far too fast for the cumbersome bureaucracy they both worked for. Or better put, someone had pushed this investigation

through a little too speedily. It wasn't just Chief McCalister who was eager to "put this baby to bed." So could Carrie herself have been set up? Instead of an accident, could this be a homicide?

He'd suspect it except for what Carrie had told him about the "business." No staged death scenes for those people. She'd told him her friend had been found floating decapitated in the bay—that story was true. Jake had checked it out. According to his West Coast connection, one Franco diFranco Marcacelli, a distant cousin of her ex-husband, had been pulled out of San Francisco Bay a month ago, headless.

So if Carrie's demise had been a means of shutting her up, it hadn't been her "associates" who had staged that "accident."

Problem was, he had absolutely no evidence, not even a shred of it, to lead him in any new direction. And though for several days he harbored the slim hope that a package might arrive for him, special delivery, it never did.

So eventually Jake Valari had come to his own conclusion, that if there'd been a laptop and disks someone else had gotten to them before him.

He smelled the coffee first, which surprised him. He'd thought a woman her age would prefer tea. He didn't know where he'd gotten that idea, probably from the same place that made him believe all women her age were small, thin, and frail. He'd been wrong about that, too.

"Sergeant Valari, how nice to see you." Minerva Drew's first words. No surprise in them, and why should there be? He visited now and again, checked on her to see how she was doing. "Won't you come in?"

In the past it had been enough just to see her, and as he did with other elderly citizens in town, he'd shake his head, say he was "just looking in," and go on. But this time he took off his hat, nodded, and said he'd like that.

That surprised her, pleasantly so, and they went together into her small, neat, and very warm kitchen.

"I was just pouring myself a cup of coffee—would you care to join me?" she asked.

"I'd like that, too," he said, taking a seat at her small round table. "A little milk, one sugar," he told her.

For a moment there was silence as he watched her move around her kitchen, fairly quickly. He understood then where Carrie had gotten her strength, her agility—her father's side, no doubt. Minerva Drew might have been past eighty, but she showed few signs of physical decline.

She opened the refrigerator to get the milk, swinging the door wide, so Jake could see the pictures on it.

In magnetic frames was a small montage of photos, some of people he recognized. Friends, many with Minerva in the photograph, too. Probably taken on senior citizen outings. He took one of the photographs down.

It had been two weeks since this woman's niece had been pulled out of the canal in a wet-suit, victim of her own . . .

Her own what? Impatience? No, then fears? No again, then what—stupidity? None of it made sense. None of it fit the Carrie Drew he had known.

Minerva Drew knew he had the picture in his hand but said nothing, brought the coffee cups to the table.

He put the photograph back on the refrigerator, looked over the others; she had a good half dozen there of Carrie, from childhood all the way to graduation. It wasn't such a strange place to put photos, he thought; many people spend their happiest moments in their kitchens.

"Quite a few of Carrie, I see," Jake finally said. He tapped the graduation photo with his knuckle. It showed a somewhat overweight, frowning, but attractive girl looking straight ahead. "She was a goodlooking girl."

"Yes, she was," Minerva Drew said. "But that isn't Carrie, sergeant. That's my other niece, Casey."

"Casey?" He turned to look at her, then quickly scanned the other pictures.

"Casey Drew, the daughter of my other brother. I don't think you knew him. They lived in Harwich."

"Casey . . ." Suddenly he realized he couldn't tell Casey from Carrie among the half dozen photos there.

"Casey and Carrie, two different girls, sergeant. Night and day.

Total opposites, in personality, that is. Casey . . ." A deep sigh; she took a seat at the table and suddenly dropped her head to her hand.

Immediately he walked over to her.

"I'm sorry, sergeant, how foolish of me. It's just that it's been hard, losing both girls in such a short time."

"Both girls?"

"Yes." She lifted her head. "Casey and Carrie were physically similar, true, but there was one other way they were alike: both struggled with their weight. Unfortunately, Casey took a different approach to solving her problem. She went on a diet . . ."

She paused, drew in a deep breath; this was not easy for her. "Lost a lot of weight. Even Carrie commented on how good her cousin looked last spring, when Carrie came for a visit. Anyhow, she lost too much too quickly. She was taking pills to help her, and . . ." Another pause, curled fingers to her mouth.

"How did Casey die?" he asked.

"They said heart attack," Minerva Drew told him; her eyes were wet.

Jake pulled out a chair, sat down heavily.

"Minerva . . . Minnie," Jake said softly, "did Carrie come for her cousin's funeral?"

The answer was swift, angry. "No, and we fought bitterly about it, just days before Carrie left and checked into the Blue Goose." She reached for a napkin and dabbed at her eyes. "Carrie came for her

ex-husband's funeral last spring. Then I saw her two weeks ago, just before she was killed. Sergeant, are you here to ask more questions about Carrie? I thought I was done with that. Those investigators said I wouldn't be bothered about it again."

Jake looked at the pictures scattered across the front of the refrigerator. "Where is Casey buried, Minerva?"

"In the family vault, of course. Manamesset Cemetery, near the canal—"

"In the family vault?"

"Yes, sergeant, we have a family vault. We go way back in this town as you probably know. There's just one place left in it now, for myself."

"A vault," he repeated; he felt his heart sink. "Who has a key to that vault?"

"Why, I do, and the caretakers, I assume." She gave him a slightly puzzled look. "Why are you asking all these questions, sergeant? Why do you care where Casey—"

"And Carrie . . . she's in the family vault, too," he said, though he realized it sounded more like a question.

"No."

"No?"

"No, Carrie told me on more than one occasion that she didn't want to be buried, or interred in the family vault. In fact, if you don't mind my being irreverent—Carrie's in this house, in my closet, her urn, that is. I had her cremated. She wanted her ashes spread over the water."

She shrugged, a gesture so similar to her niece's it was eerie.

"Carrie Drew was cremated."

"Yes. Sergeant, whatever is wrong?"

Without a word he rose, walked to her phone, picked it up, then paused. For what reason would he be calling them now? What would he say? That he suspected . . . What did he suspect? Suddenly he didn't know. Because what was working itself out in his brain couldn't make sense . . . didn't make sense.

Two bodies had been found. One dressed in ordinary clothes. An embalmed body. The Mexican girl, or so they thought, whose hair matched that found in the body bag that had washed up on Onset Beach.

Then there was the other body, so similar to the first, in a wet-suit. She had drowned.

Then he knew: Caroline Drew hadn't found herself a body double—no!

She had found herself—was it possible?—a body triple!

So, who was who?

He looked at the refrigerator, scattered images of old memories, then at the phone receiver, still in his hand.

And for what cause? Did he have a right to bring this pain—to that woman who already knew so much of pain, disappointment, sadness? How did anyone tell her that he suspected . . .

No, that he *knew* . . .

Knew that in the county morgue lay a body that no one wanted, including the Mexican authorities, a body waiting for county funds so she could be decently buried.

And he knew who she was.

As well as who Minerva Drew had had cremated, whose remains were in an urn in her closet.

Carrie had told him that the body she had bought had not been embalmed, had been kept on ice until someone came forward to claim or purchase it. She hadn't lied about that. That woman had drowned. And that was the woman who had been cremated.

Yes, suddenly he had no doubt about any of it. Caroline Drew had staged her own botched death! What better way to make it look real, authentic, than to mess it up?

And what better tactic than to draw the police—him—into it?

Except he'd taken Captain Stuart's advice, said nothing, and let the state and federal investigators draw their own inevitable conclusions.

He put the phone into its cradle slowly.

But how would all this be discovered? Would one day someone pull out the vault containing Casey Drew and find it empty?

And if this evidence led to the conclusion that Carrie Drew was still alive (Damn! She'd planted two corpses, not one!), would the "business people" she'd worked for start searching for her? Would they come here and threaten or harm this gentle elderly woman?

For he was positive, staring at Minerva Drew's face, that she knew nothing about any of this.

No. He wouldn't—he couldn't do it.

"Hell," Jake muttered as the

battered manila envelope was thrown on his desk. Woody Parsons stood there with a huge grin on his freckled face.

"Where did you say they found this thing?"

"At the base of the old water tower, out in the woods on the edge of the salt marsh. Bunch of kids out there messing around found it wedged in one of the metal legs."

A manila envelope, wrapped in a clear plastic bag. Written on it were the words "Please deliver to Sergeant Jacob Valari, Manamesset Police Department."

"Have you looked inside?" Jake snapped.

Instantly the other man's smile vanished. "No, sarge, and neither did the kids. They're good kids. I gave them cokes out of the soda machine. You want me to go get them?"

"No." He looked up at Woody, barked impatiently, "Thank you, officer. You can go now."

The disks were each wrapped in plastic, taped up securely, and were numbered one through six. He put the first one into his computer and opened the file; it was titled SERGEANT JACOB VALARI.

And watched, and waited while it slowly opened up—

To a plain white square with a large black stain in the center, thinning out to the sides.

There it was, on the disk, and suddenly he understood. Not him Carrie had been running from that night. Not Jake.

There was an arrow at the bot-

tom, the word NEXT. He moved the cursor over it, clicked twice; the stain vanished, replaced by these words:

So you see, I couldn't wait. I hope you understand. I also hope these will compensate for some of the misery I've caused. And if I survive, and only one body is found, I hope you let me stay dead, Jake. Then destroy this disk, and give the others to someone you can trust. Just read Disk 2 first. It contains a database of over three hundred names, some of which will surprise you. Everything can be verified on the others. It's quite an elaborate network they've put together: mail, photos, and other things; you'll see. So good luck,

watch over Aunt Minnie for me—and be careful.

Carrie Drew

He popped out the disk, slipped in the second one, watched as the names came up slowly, one by one . . . including that of a prominent senator, one who served on various important committees, especially those involving transportation and maritime matters, and who'd recently been cleared by a federal subcommittee investigating questionable campaign fundraising as well as other ethical violations.

That was when Jake Valari blew out a long, low whistle and settling back in his chair, whispered, "Thank you, Carrie Anne."

SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

Dave Inch was the dastardly and heartless killer of the kindly old Father Mulcahey.

DAY	HUSBAND AND WIFE	ALIAS	PROFESSION	CITY
Mon.	Charles and Freda Mott	"Inch"	forgery	Tulsa
Tue.	Frank and Alice Julio	"North"	arsonist	Queens
Wed.	Brad and Ellen Lambe	"Julio"	hijacker	Reno
Thr.	Dave and Betty Inch	"Katz"	kidnapper	Utica
Fri.	Andrew and Carla North	"Howe"	dynamiter	Pittsburgh
Sat.	Edward and Gina Howe	"Mott"	hit man	Sandusky
Sun.	George and Doris Katz	"Lambe"	embezzler	Omaha

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

The Chief of Intelligence closed the door before speaking. "Humphrey," he said to the much older man, "we have trouble."

"Not unusual, Thomas," responded Humphrey Dumfries, the retired chief. "Back in my day here at Central Intelligence we also had a few problems. What is it this time?"

"Someone drilled into my personal deposit box in the Top Secret vault. I'd visited it on Sunday, the second of this month. Everything was in order. When I went there yesterday, Monday the tenth, my box was empty. It has to be one of my staff, since entry into the vault requires both a handprint-activated release and the insertion of the proper matching card, which records times of entry and departure."

"Valuable papers taken?"

"Enough to start several uprisings and the disruption of diplomatic relations with a dozen countries—I'll not mention which ones."

"What about the surveillance camera? That should show the traitor in action."

Chief Thomas Tompkins ran fingers through his thinning sandy hair. "Unfortunately, Humphrey, whoever did it removed the tape from the camera."

Dumfries emitted a low whistle. "I see. You *do* have a problem. Drilling through that special steel must have taken hours."

"The head of Shur-Lock Company, which installed it, estimates that the job took at least four hours."

"There's your answer, Thomas. The entry-exit cards should show who was in the vault the longest time."

"That's another part of the problem, old friend. The thief managed to shred the cards. I have pieced together most of the fragments—like working a twenty thousand piece jigsaw puzzle—but too much is missing to indicate directly who is responsible."

"Who went there during the week?" queried Dumfries.

"Four men—Andrew, Bertrand, Claude, and Donald—and three women—Elvira, Flora, and Greta. Their last names include Osmund, Palmer, Quimby, Rogers, Snyder, Trittner, and Unser. They are experts on Africa, China, India, Iraq, Japan, Korea, and Palestine."

"Tell me more."

"Each visited the vault on a different day to update the contents of their individual strongboxes. And—

(1) "Andrew, Bertrand, and Claude include Mr. Unser, the man who went there on Tuesday the fourth, and the expert on Korea (who isn't Mr. Trittner). The three women include Ms. Rogers (who isn't the Palestinian expert), the Iraq expert, and the one who visited the vault on Thursday the sixth.

(2) "The experts on Iraq, Japan, and China (who isn't Mr. Trittner) include Donald, Osmund, and the woman who went there on Wednesday the fifth (who isn't Greta).

(3) "Greta, the woman expert on India (who isn't Flora), and the man who visited the vault on Monday the third (who isn't Bertrand) have the last names of Quimby, Rogers, and Snyder."

Old Dumfries paused in taking notes. "I'm beginning to figure out who's who among your suspects. Now, how much did you learn from the shredded time cards?"

"Well," answered Tompkins, "as I said, the information is incomplete. However, I can tell you this:

(4) "The times of entry were 8:32, 8:39, 8:45, 8:50, 8:58, 9:01, and 9:05. The times of departure were 12:04, 12:13, 12:20, 12:30, 12:34, 12:39, and 12:47.

(5) "The total time spent in the vault was exactly the same for three persons: Flora, Quimby, and the one who went there on Tuesday the fourth. None of the three checked out at 12:47.

(6) "Bertrand and Elvira spent exactly the same length of time in there.

(7) "Claude went to the vault the day before Flora; Bertrand (who is not the Palestinian expert) and Elvira went there later in the week. Donald was not there on Monday the third or Sunday the ninth. Snyder, who visited the vault sometime after Andrew, went there the day before whoever checked in at 8:45.

(8) "The Palestinian expert checked out at an earlier time than did the person who entered at 8:45.

(9) "The person who was there on Thursday the sixth checked in at

a time at least fifteen minutes later than the time recorded by the person there on Wednesday but before the time shown on Claude's card.

(10) "Elvira visited the vault the day before the person who checked in at 9:01."

Elderly Humphrey Dumfries pored over his notes and made some calculations in pencil. Minutes dragged by. Finally he announced, "The only person who could have had the necessary time to drill your box and abscond with its vital contents is _____. Thomas, you'd better alert Security—immediately!"

Who was the despicable traitor who stole Chief Tompkins' invaluable papers?

See page 100 for the solution to the March puzzle.

.....

Can you use help working these puzzles?

If so, try "Solving the 'Unsolved,'" a 24-page booklet by Robert Kesling that shows you how most logic puzzles are solved.

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"UNSOLVED"

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE
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NEW YORK, NY 10016

FICTION



THE COLD ROOM

L. A. Wilson, Jr.

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/99

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There was a cold place in Miz Georgia's house. Everybody knew it was there, and they only talked about it out of Miz Georgia's sight. Nobody knew for sure when it first appeared, but once its chill was felt, few wanted to return to experience it again.

Miz Georgia seemed completely oblivious to it and moved around her tiny shack as if it didn't exist. Most of the neighbors, whose concern about the elderly woman's wellbeing compelled them to visit her from time to time, made a point of confining their visits to the kitchen, well away from the place where it began.

Miz Georgia Bailey lived in a two room shack whose compartments were barely larger than my wife's walk-in closet. It had survived for some sixty years although no one was quite sure why. As long as I could remember, it had been a decaying, dilapidated, unpainted structure with a rusting tin roof, elevated on stubby columns of brick as was the custom in rural North Carolina during the early decades of the century. Even now, long after Miz Georgia's death, remnants of the layers of newspapers that were used to plaster the inner walls against the winter's cold still hung there, drawing my eyes to long-forgotten stories and memories.

Miz Georgia had lived in the shack with her husband Herman. It was said they had raised two children during the years they'd sharecropped on Martin Everette's farm although I had only known of one. It was a harsh life wherein long hours of work were rewarded with tokens that could only be spent in the bossman's store, and children were deprived of school to harvest the bossman's crops. It was a life in which survival meant sacrifice, and sacrifice meant surrendering your soul for the price of breath and sustenance.

Miz Georgia's survival ultimately didn't depend solely on Martin Everette's largesse. She was a godfearing woman who wore her religion like a suit of armor. Her religion was her strength, and it inspired those who knew her to support and protect her.

I came to know Miz Georgia after her husband had died, and I remember her as a person who was fiercely protective of her child, and indeed all children. She had been my babysitter, a job that my parents and many other parents in the community delegated to her as a means of providing her with a dignified source of money. It was the loving and nurturing kindness and wisdom that she offered me during those years that had compelled me to come back to this place after so long.

I stepped in the open front door, testing the rotting floorboards gingerly. Some of the wallboards had fallen away, leaving large gaps in the frame. Weeds grew up between the cracks in what remained of the floor. It was empty, of course. Its contents had long since been removed after Miz Georgia's death. It was curious that the Everettes, who still owned the farm, had allowed the structure to remain. I cau-

tiously made my way through the collapsing threshold to the bedroom. I had to know if the vague memories from my childhood had a real basis. Two steps into the room brought me to an abrupt halt. The cold was startling. It chilled my bones, raising goose pimples and setting off violent shivers. This was the middle of June, and the temperature inside the shack was at least ninety degrees except for the spot two steps inside the bedroom.

I stepped back. All the fearful memories, encouraged by the stories repeated during my youth, crowded in on me. I walked to my left and felt my blood warming again. When I reached toward the spot once more, I could feel the cold steal into my fingers and creep up my arm. It had all been true. It was there. It was still there—the cold spot that had chilled my soul and lay screaming in my memories, refusing to let me forget.

“Hey! What you doin’ in there?”

The nasal twang of the voice was a startling but welcome excuse for me to pull myself away from this place that was both frightening and mesmerizing. I stepped outside to see a tall blond man exhibiting the appropriate amount of hostility on finding a stranger making himself at home on his property.

“How you doin’? I’m Winston Scott.” I reached out to shake his hand, but he stood there glowering at me and left it hanging.

“I grew up around here,” I continued. “My daddy used to be principal of the Rosenwald School—Walter Scott. You might have heard folks mention him. He died awhile back.”

He didn’t change his expression at all but just stared at me, scrutinizing me from head to toe. “What are you doing in there? This is private property. You can’t just walk into people’s property and do any goddamned thing you want.”

“Look, I don’t want any trouble.” I tried to reason with him. “Miz Georgia used to babysit me. I just wanted to look around.”

“If I was you, I’d git my ass off Mr. Everette’s property.”

“Martin Everette’s still alive?” I blurted the question out in spite of the man’s hostility. Martin Everette would have to be a hundred years old by now.

“Forrest Everette,” the man answered. “Mr. Martin died a long time ago. His son runs the farm now, and he don’t want nobody going into this place, especially no niggers.”

The words seared like a knife wound. The racial epithet was delivered in a matter-of-fact manner as if it was a normal part of his speech pattern. It had been thirty years since I’d spent any appreciable time in Halifax County, North Carolina, and I had forgotten how acceptable some of its inhabitants found the denigration of their perceived inferiors. I swallowed the insult as if I hadn’t heard it. I was forty-nine years old, facing a burly young man half my age who had a mysteri-

ous bulge under his shirt that was more than a little intimidating. Even after thirty years I hadn't forgotten how cheap a black man's life could be in this section of the country.

I walked away from Miz Georgia's house with the man's eyes burning a hole in my back, got in my car, and drove away. Miz Georgia's mysterious house had whetted my appetite, and my curiosity demanded more. This, however, was not the time for heroics, so I retreated until a better time.

My Aunt India, as always, was overjoyed to see me. Like most people in the county, she allowed food to be the embodiment of her joy, so she cooked, then fed me until I could barely stand.

As much as I loved Aunt India, my greatest and unsurpassed delight was in seeing her husband, my Uncle Leonard. He was my mother's oldest brother, who at eighty-three years of age still boasted about being able to beat men half his age in any physical task, including fighting. He was the one who'd taught me how to shoot a gun and ride a horse, and had told me endless stories of his unequalled army exploits during World War II. Best of all, when he and my father made the Christmas eggnog, he was the one who always sneaked a ten-year-old a small sip of Four Roses before spiking the concoction.

As the evening's darkness began its steady encroachment, I brought a grin to Uncle Leonard's face in spite of Aunt India's disapproving eye when I set a fifth of Four Roses on the kitchen table. She made a hasty exit, mumbling her dissatisfaction, as Uncle Leonard started to fill the first of many glasses that we'd consume that night.

"You know, I went by Miz Georgia's old house before I got here. A big husky white boy, about twenty-five or twenty-six, ran me off. He was nasty as hell about it, called me a nigger."

"Billy Travis," Uncle Leonard replied between sips of whisky. "Poor white trash that Forrest Everette hired to help take care of the place. I'm surprised somebody ain't killed him by now. Somebody needs to. What you doin' over there anyway?"

"Just wanted to see the place," I replied. "You know how it is. It's been a long time. It brings back memories . . . good memories."

"Yeah, I know," he responded somewhat sadly. "Miz Georgia was a good woman."

"You know how everybody always said there was a cold spot in that house? It's true. It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. There's a spot in that place that's just like ice. I thought I remembered that. I know I remember everybody talking about it, and it's there. Just one spot and it chills the hell out of you."

I watched a cloud come over Uncle Leonard's face. He grew silent and pensive for a moment as if he was trying to decide how to respond.

"I never went inside that place even when she died." His voice was

subdued and more serious than I had ever heard. "India used to go see her, but I don't think she ever went past the kitchen except for one time. She told me it felt cold in there, but you know how women are. I didn't pay no 'tention to her." He filled his glass again. "You drink like your daddy. Hell, I'm gonna finish this fifth before you git started good."

"I'm a city boy now, Uncle Leonard. I ain't used to it like before. If I drink this stuff too fast, I'll fall out on you. You believe in ghosts?"

"Sho-o-ot. I been all around the world. I ain't seen nothing yet I couldn't understand." He grinned and took another sip, clearing his throat loudly as he finished the glass.

"Then you should have seen this, Uncle Leonard. This was some weird stuff." I took two quick gulps in a token effort to hold my own.

"You want to go back?" he asked.

The question was unexpected. I wasn't sure I wanted to confront Billy Travis or whatever caused that cold spot in the dark.

Uncle Leonard stood up, wavering slightly from the effects of the whisky. "I'll go with you. Billy Travis, Forrest Everette, neither one don't mean nothin' to me."

"All right. Hell. Let's go." My mind knew better, but the Four Roses said that with the courage it provided, and Uncle Leonard, anything was possible.

Uncle Leonard left the room and returned a few minutes later pulling on his denim jacket and carrying something that riveted my attention.

"Hey! What's that?"

"What?"

"That!" I answered pointing to the weapon in his hand.

"Oh hell. You seen this before. I don't go nowhere without my shotgun. You want this?"

He pulled a silver .45 automatic from his belt. It was a vintage weapon that he'd brought back from the war. He checked the clip, slapped it back in, and fed a round into the chamber. "Now, if you don't know what to do with it, I'll keep it." He scrutinized me in an effort to determine my resolve. "Yeah, I guess I'll keep it," he muttered to himself as he stuffed it back into his belt.

Aunt India followed us out of the house offering a string of disapproving insults to discourage us, but the Four Roses dulled their impact and we kept going. I began to understand a little about why Uncle Leonard drank as the shrill voice was muffled by the surging car engine.

We made our way down the two-lane blacktop highway to Miz Georgia's house. I kept the car windows rolled down, but the warm night air did little to alter the numbness in my face. Uncle Leonard seemed largely unaffected by the whisky, but he was silent during our drive.

The bright June moon bathed the countryside in stark gray tones as we walked toward the little shack that sat some thirty yards from the road.

The cold was just as I had described it. Uncle Leonard was fascinated by the phenomenon. He directed his flashlight toward the gaping hole in the roof and back down toward the decaying floor. There was nothing there. There was nothing to explain the strange and disturbing phenomenon, and the longer we stayed, and the more the alcohol dissipated, the more an anxious terror began to build inside me.

Uncle Leonard was tenacious, sticking his hand in the coldness, withdrawing it, and touching the floor and walls in an effort to gain some understanding of the source of the phenomenon. He dislodged one of the decaying floorboards, directed his light underneath, and removed another.

"Goddamn! Look at that." He tugged at my arm, directing my attention to a pile of rocks that lay under the house.

All of a sudden I was sober. My heart was racing, and a feeling of utter dread virtually assaulted me. I reached down through the floor into the chill that made me shiver uncontrollably. I felt compelled to touch the rocks, and when I did, my hand jerked back almost involuntarily. The rocks were cold, so cold that they almost burned the skin, as cold as hot ice.

Uncle Leonard just sat there shaking his head. He wasn't a superstitious man. He had spent fifty years dropping Aunt India off at church every Sunday morning, then returning home to sip his Four Roses until it was time to pick her up again. His face held a look of astonishment, of disbelief. The flashlight trembled in his hand, and he clutched the shotgun for a courage that he'd never required before.

I leaned into the circumference of the coldness, braving the chill, and began to remove the mound of rocks. I knocked away some more of the rotting floorboards and dropped through the floor where I could work with more ease. I used fragments of the wood to dig into the dirt beneath the rocks, stopping every few minutes to step away from the numbing chill.

"There!" Uncle Leonard saw it first, a small, grayish-white, round object.

I dug deeper into the shallow depression, revealing fragments of bone.

"Jesus Christ!" The object we had seen became completely exposed. My heart was thumping as if it would escape my chest. It was a skull, a small skull, a child's skull.

"Hey! Who's in there!? Is that you, nigger? You better get your black ass out of there."

My eyes met Uncle Leonard's, and he flicked off the light. I climbed out of the hole in the floor and walked out the front door with great trepidation.

Billy Travis stood sneering in the moonlight, shining a flashlight in my face and holding a pistol in his other hand. "I ought to shoot your black ass right here. Didn't I tell you that Mr. Everette didn't want nobody on his property? Don't you know you're trespassing? Come over here, nigger. Come over here and get down on your knees."

The strangeness of that moment was beyond my understanding. I was calm, unrealistically so. Somehow I had instantly made up my mind what I wasn't going to do and what I was willing to sacrifice for the sake of that decision. I stood there staring down the barrel of Billy Travis's pistol. I was prepared to die if necessary, but I was not going to allow this white trash to humiliate me before he did it.

An ear-splitting explosion almost shocked me to my knees. I saw Billy Travis jump backwards. He dropped the flashlight and almost dropped the gun. He stood there with his mouth agape and his eyes stretched wide with terror. He started to raise the pistol again, but Uncle Leonard made him reconsider.

"That one was just to get your attention." He leveled the still smoking shotgun at Billy's chest. "This is double-aught buck, boy. There won't be enough left of you for a rat to piss on if I pull this trigger."

"You gon' git yours, old man. You can count on it. I ain't gon' take this." Billy's voice trembled almost as much as his body. He was talking to try to give himself courage, and we all knew it.

"I'm eighty-three years old, boy. Dying don't mean nothin' to me." Uncle Leonard stepped closer to Billy until the shotgun's barrel touched his chest. "You twitch that gun hand one time, and we'll see how much it means to you." He stared at Billy, eyeball to eyeball, until the younger man cowered and looked away. "You can leave the pistol here."

Billy looked up desperately.

"I mean it." Uncle Leonard's voice was as cold as the spot in Miz Georgia's house.

Billy let the pistol slip from his hand and backed away, stumbling toward his car. He gunned the engine as he sped off, causing the car to skid wildly across the dirt onto the asphalt.

"I think we'd better get away from here, nephew." Uncle Leonard slapped my shoulder and guided my shaking legs toward the car. "I'm glad I didn't have to kill that boy. I would have had to listen to India's mouth for the rest of the night."

Daylight does wonders for the nerves. The bright June sunshine of the following day gave me the courage to go to the place where at least some answers should be found. I drove down a long, winding driveway toward the elegant mansion at its end.

Forrest Everette sat on the front porch of the Big House. It was a huge white colonial structure with giant columns that perpetuated the

image of power it had been intended to instill. I remembered Forrest from my childhood. He was an older boy in his late teens when I'd first seen him, the son who hadn't worn his family's status very well. He took pleasure in letting the word nigger roll off his lips at every opportunity. He had been a cruel person who took pleasure in adding to the misery of those who were helpless to defend themselves. This was 1994, however, and Forrest Everette should have been in his early sixties. We were both older, and I was curious to see if we were both also wiser.

Wandering into Miz Georgia's rotting shack and discovering that my vague memory of a mysterious, unexplained phenomenon was real had become an excuse for me to make my trip home something other than just a visit to see my family. The discovery of human bones was even more compelling. I hadn't been away from Halifax County so long that I had forgotten what justice was like there. Telling the police about the house would be of little significance unless Forrest wanted them to know, so I didn't bother. I went straight to the boss-man himself. He would either choose to make something out of this or drop it. Either way I would have some sort of an answer.

"You are one bold son of a bitch, I'll give you that." He walked toward me as I got out of my car. "So you're 'Fessor Scott's boy. I can't say that I remember you." He looked me up and down, trying to decide how important I might be and how inconvenienced he might become by dealing with me.

"Winston Scott." I introduced myself but didn't waste my time by offering a handshake. "I work for a newspaper in Atlanta called the *Tribune*. I didn't mean anything by going on your property. I was just looking around. This place has a lot of memories for me. I've been thinking about writing an article about the rural South—you know, one of those nostalgia pieces. I really apologize if I caused you any problems."

My words were so insincere that I thought I'd choke on them, but it was what he needed to hear. It was also what was required if I was going to learn what I needed to know.

"You'll get yourself killed quick if you keep screwing around on my land. You'd do better if you did all your newspaper writing back in Atlanta. You gon' have problems around here. And you'd better get your uncle straight. He's an old man, and I'd hate to see something bad happen to him."

I ignored his warning. "Mr. Everette, I'm curious. Why didn't you ever tear down Miz Georgia's house?"

He glared at me, his face exhibiting a mixture of anger and incredulity at my lack of intimidation.

"Did you know that there's a place in that house that's as cold as a freezer?"

His expression abruptly changed. His lower jaw became slack, and his lips quivered ever so slightly. He looked as if he wanted to say

something, but his words were trapped by his hostility and his prejudice.

"... And there are bones, human bones, buried under the bedroom," I continued. "The cold seems to be coming from those bones. I'm not a superstitious man. I don't believe in that sort of thing, but I swear to God there's something there that I can't explain."

"You *sonuvabitch*! Get out of here!" He spat the words out in a curdling near-scream. His rage seemed to swell his reddened face and accentuated the blood vessels in his forehead. "I ought to kill you. Get the hell off my property! Billy! Billy!"

I started looking for an exit route while keeping a nervous eye on Forrest Everette. I wasn't a part of that generation that was easily intimidated by racist ravings, but hysterical and inappropriate anger was a different thing. There was something about the few words that we'd exchanged that had struck a nerve in Everette. His eyes held a wild desperation that suggested his control was tenuous at best. Even in 1994, killing a black man while in the throes of an uncontrollable rage was a pardonable sin for a white landowner.

I left Forrest Everette still raving about my trespassing on his property. I had just finished my first glass of Four Roses, having allowed Uncle Leonard to use my description of my encounter with Forrest Everette as an excuse to open a fresh bottle, when the windows rattled with the force of a shattering explosion.

We rushed out into the front yard as Aunt India screamed. Across the flatness of the coastal plains a fireball capped with thick black smoke rose into the summer sky.

We jumped into Uncle Leonard's truck and rushed down the road. The fire obviously came from the adjacent property—Forrest Everette's land. As we drew closer, we could only see a massive column of flame and smoke where Miz Georgia's shack had been.

Billy Travis sat on the ground at the side of the road. He was sobbing. The belligerence and posturing were all gone now. Tragedy has a way of leveling things and instilling humility. "Mr. Everette's in there," he cried. "I tried to help him, but I couldn't. He was like a crazy man. He said he should have gotten rid of this place a long time ago."

"Forrest Everette? Are you sure?" I asked. The place was an inferno. The searing heat was almost blistering even at a distance of thirty yards. There was no possibility that anyone could survive in there.

"Hell yes, I'm sure!" Billy blurted out in his anguish. "I was with him. We had gasoline cans, and we were dousing the place. Mr. Everette said he was going to burn it to the ground. He—he struck a match and threw it in the corner of that back room, and it just went up in a flash. I headed outside, and when I looked back, Mr. Everette was still standing there. I... I called him, but he didn't move. I pulled at him, and... and it was like something was holding him. His arm

was straight out, and he was straining like he was trying to pull away from something. The fire was all around us. My goddamned clothes were starting to smoke. When I grabbed his arm, it was cold . . . like ice. I ain't never seen nothing like that. I couldn't move him. The fire started to burn me, so I ran. I ran. I had to get out of there. God! Oh God! He just burned up. He just burned alive."

His reddened eyes looked up at us beseechingly, begging for compassion and understanding. We stood there with him for awhile and gradually drifted away without making any comments. We were different people whose empathies had discrete limits that were not easily extended.

The fire department's water tanker eventually arrived, but there was nothing left to do except to make sure that the boundaries of the fire remained contained. Miz Georgia's house had been reduced to a charred pile of smoldering embers.

"Y'all men think y'all know everything." Aunt India chastised us with that I-told-you-so voice she reserved for putting us in our places. "If y'all had asked me, I could have told you that something bad was going to happen over there. The Lord works in mysterious ways. Yes, He does. Forrest Everette got what was coming to him. I knew it was going to happen. I didn't know when. I'm just glad it happened during my lifetime."

Uncle Leonard shook his head and poured himself another drink, resigned to the fact that he was going to have to listen to Aunt India try to prove once again that she was wiser than the rest of us.

"What do you think happened, Aunt India?" I asked in my best patronizing voice.

"I don't think, Winston," she corrected me succinctly, "I know. I know what happened. Miz Georgia's baby boy Levi, the one they say disappeared—he didn't disappear. Forrest Everette killed him. Forrest Everette was evil, vile, and filthy. He killed that little boy. He was a nasty one. He liked little boys. Now even Martin Everette's son wasn't going to rape little white boys in Halifax County and get away with it, so he preyed on little black boys. His daddy had a farm full of sharecroppers, poor black folks who couldn't read or write, who didn't have nowhere to go and nowhere they could live except on his farm—folks who worked all day and got paid in tokens instead of money. All they had was their children, and he thought he could use them any way he wanted and nobody would say anything. You know something? He was right. He killed that boy, and Miz Georgia knew he killed him. He made her bury that child under her house and told her to keep her mouth shut, and she did it."

"Aunt India! Jesus! I can't believe that." The horror of of Miz Georgia's anguish, how she lived in that house, and walked around the

community all those years while choking back her pain was overwhelming. I couldn't find the words to express my outrage. I wanted to raise Forrest Everette from the dead and kill him again.

"It was a different time, Winston. Mr. Martin was ashamed of what Forrest Everette was, and black folks were ashamed of what we let him get away with doing to our children. Anyways, folks didn't talk about things the way they do now. Besides, you were a schoolteacher's child, and your folks had the kind of jobs and money to protect you from this kind of ugliness. You have no idea how afraid and helpless it felt to live in servitude. You have no idea how it felt to know every day of your life that on any given day any white man in the county could snuff out your life on a whim and nothing would be done about it. Miz Georgia did what she had to do to survive. She had another child to raise and try to keep safe. Her husband would have been killed if he had tried to do anything. When he got sick and died, it was all on her, so she just prayed about it. One day I went over there to see her, and I felt that cold spot and I knew that someday justice was coming for Forrest Everette. Miz Georgia just went about her life like that cold place wasn't even there, 'cause she knew, too. She knew that someday he would get what was coming to him. I'm just sorry she didn't live to see it."

Back in Atlanta I sat in front of my word processor trying to write about what I had seen without really knowing what I had seen. The nostalgia piece I had planned was dead. This was something new, something different. It was something angry and frightening, but somehow comforting at the same time. There was justice in the world after all. I'm sure that Forrest Everette understood that just before he died. Billy Travis, with his feeble-minded meanness, probably learned that as well. Justice did and should hold a terror for those who deserve its retribution. The terror should have a short-lived finality like that served in Miz Georgia's cold room. I struggled for the words to explain that. Nothing seemed adequate. They would not come. Perhaps what happened needed no explanation. Justice was all that was required.

WOMAN IN A BOX

Ann Ripley



Diane might have gone on indefinitely with the way things were if she hadn't attended a sensitivity group session with her artist neighbor Sue. Unlike the rest of the people in this Midwestern college town who had decided she wasn't worth

the effort, Sue never gave up her attempts to get the reclusive Diane out of the house and away from her books. For above all else Diane was a bookworm, reading every chance she got, in the bathtub, in bed, and sometimes even while selecting groceries at the



supermarket. Always, certainly, while waiting to pick her husband up at the commuter train.

Before she left the house for the sensitivity session, Diane pulled her straggly hair back into a bun and dabbed hopefully at her face with a makeup brush. What resulted was far from a miracle: she merely looked like a plain woman wearing oddly placed blush that gave her a faintly clownish look.

Sue was picking her up, which would present a challenge to Diane in that she would have to engage in woman talk. She was no sooner seated in the car than Sue demanded, in a tense voice, "Be straight with me, Diane: how's it going with Frank?"

"He's gone to San Francisco again."

"So he's off again. Do you think . . . for sure . . ."

"It's a woman?" She rolled incredulous eyes at Sue. "Does the sun rise in the morning? Of course it's another woman."

Sue sighed. She knew about these matters, having lost a husband to a predatory female not long ago. "Oh well. Let's not think about unpleasant things like men. We'll be there soon, and you're going to like this group, Diane. They don't know anything about Frank, and if they did, they wouldn't care a hoot. They'll really open your eyes."

"I need to open my eyes."

The sensitivity session was being held at the home of a woman who was a guru for Sue and other female artists in town. She was

small, her bare feet, flowing hair, and long black cotton broomstick skirt giving her a sixties look. She greeted Diane effusively at the door and immediately threw her into a panic. "You've come on a very special day, Diane. We'll be opening our souls to each other: we're going to explore our inner greatness."

Eyes wide with alarm, Diane muttered, "Oh my God . . ." but no one heard, and she was swept in among the sea of earnest artists. The house was large, airy, its walls adorned with the guru's pink and mauve watercolors. Diane felt as if she'd fallen like Alice in Wonderland into a strange world, this one done in pastels. But once everyone was settled down with coffee and bundt cake, her uneasiness faded. The guru seemed to be giving a lecture; it was a profusion of poetic images about the creative process that went straight over Diane's head. Her attention wandered to the thirty or so attentive women sitting in a circle around their leader. She realized that only in a little academic enclave like theirs would anyone find enough restless female artists to make up a whole sensitivity group.

Suddenly the guru switched gears. She told them she wanted each person to describe her own "greatness" to the group. Diane's stomach did a somersault, and it felt as if the coffee she had drunk had turned to green acid.

What on earth was she doing here when she had a good book going at home? She didn't paint, she didn't sculpt, she didn't weave.



She didn't work at a paying job any more, not even a second-rate job that a person clever with words might have inflated into something important. Unfortunately she sat close to the first speaker, so her turn came up quickly. She was crimson with embarrassment before she ever uttered a word.

"Now, Diane, it's your turn—tell us about your greatness."

Feeling stupid, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "My greatness is reading mystery novels."

Indulgent laughter rippled through the room like a little wave rippling across a pond.

The guru made an heroic attempt to expand Diane's greatness as one might roll out and extend a skimpy ball of piecrust. "You affirm yourself each day by reading literature . . . and in mysteries, truly, uh, you are probing for the secrets of human nature."

Diane bowed her head, then broke into a pleased smile.

"Yes, that's pretty much it." The woman made it sound so worthwhile.

Then the person next to her began to speak, and Diane's world changed. This woman was into crafts and had brought with her a translucent silken box about eight inches square. Diane was so close to it that she could see the elusive sculpture of the naked woman inside, a Barbie doll, perhaps? Yes, a Barbie doll made old before its time, her long, bare thigh supporting an elbow, her forearm supporting her chin, like Rodin's statue of *The Thinker*. On the outside of the

box were embroidered words: "criticism," "fear of success," "guilt," "expectations," and "depression."

The craftswoman leaned down and from her satchel brought forth a second, remedial box, disclosing that she'd made it when she felt better about life. It had a similar naked Barbie inside, but this one sat erect and proud. The words on the box told it all: "approval," "acceptance," "self-realization," and "freedom from guilt."

After a quick glance at the second one, Diane's eyes returned to the first box. As clearly as she'd ever known anything in her life, she knew she was the woman in that box, and the person who put her there was her husband Frank.

And just as clearly she realized that if he did one more thing to humiliate her she was going to murder him.

Their marriage hadn't seemed that unusual a combination—traditional wife, go-getting husband. After motherhood, she gave up thoughts of a career; after all, Frank was doing well in business. For some reason her aversion to work outside the house irritated him. But she thought of herself as fulfilling the role of a good mom—not overly emotional, joining the PTA, and ferrying the two boys to games and other extracurricular activities just as a mother should. Frank did his part, too; he was the very picture of a stern father, with his clean good looks and overbearing chin.

It was a bad play by their son in a Little League game that led to



their one and only physical fight. She was soothing the disconsolate seven-year-old when Frank screamed at her, "You're making the boy into a wimp!"

"I am not. I'm helping him understand it's not the bloody end of the world to miss a fly ball," she said, whereupon he slapped her in the face with the boy's mitt. The grommets made a set of parallel scrapes across her cheek that resembled Indian warpaint. She had stared at him with such hate that he had never dared touch her again.

Frank continued the tough line through the boys' teen years. "I take no prisoners, guys," he would warn them. "If I ever find that you're doing dope, or cheating in school, or not getting A's like you should, I'll cut you off without a cent." Sometimes she tried to reproach him for his harshness, but he always had a retort. "Look, I'm getting them through unscathed—what more do you want from me?" And she supposed he was right.

Things had begun to change in recent years as the boys went off to college, far away, and her bossy father died. Even her innocent mother was no longer around as a buffer; her embroidery stitches had grown so erratic that Diane knew she was ill and needed sheltered care. Without a buffer, she and Frank were like two pieces of bone without cartilage, rubbing painfully against each other. And it was obvious that the years of tension had taken a toll on their health. Here they were in their

mid-forties, Frank with dilated cardiomyopathy and eye tick, she with stomach troubles—and not even caring enough to share symptoms.

All in all their life was like a demilitarized zone, with two armies on either side warily facing off.

Of course it wasn't fair to forget that brief period of connubial bliss last year around the time of their twentieth wedding anniversary. It lasted for three days and nights into the big Caribbean boat tour. Then they tied up at Marigot in St. Martin. In this part of the island half-naked, moody Frenchwomen strode vigorously about, swam, and windsurfed.

"A bunch of anorexic Amazons, if you ask me," she grumbled to her husband, acutely aware of her forty-two inch hips. He sat in his beach chair gobbling them up with his eyes, refusing to move until the kitchen closed and they missed lunch. This incident only confirmed what she already knew in her heart: her marriage was a sham.

Recently they'd celebrated their twenty-first in a kind of vacuum of togetherness. The kids phoned from college, and there was a set of handworked towels with big, zigzaggy stitches from her mother that would have made her cry if she were the crying type.

Day to day, it was the control issues that bugged her the most. She should have known what life would be like twenty years into their marriage. By struggling like a drowning swimmer she had finally escaped the vortex of father-



ly control. She did this by paying her own tuition to an out-of-town college. But in her junior year she was sucked right into Frank's vortex. He told her, after they had known each other a few months, that he wanted to marry her but wouldn't unless she finished her degree, which she was finishing but in slow motion. She got hung up on statistics. "Frank, I can't understand the damned stuff—I just can't do it." He had dragged her through it, staying up hours with her. That was what it had always been like: his demands, first to finish the college degree, then to be a dependable mother, both of which she had satisfied. And third, always to be punctual picking him up at the six o'clock train.

Over the years she had tried to avoid doing things spontaneously, for Frank hated it. For instance she had to be careful about what she laughed at. He became furious one night during the spring playoffs when she laughed after Michael Jordan missed an easy lay-up. Turning angry eyes at her he said, "You just ridiculed the greatest athlete this century has known."

"Well, sorry!" she replied. That began a vicious fight that the neighbors probably heard, since it was a warm night with windows wide open. Her final shot was a three-pointer: "I read that piece in *Time* that said sixty-five percent of all Americans think Michael Jordan will go to heaven when he dies. But I didn't know you thought the man was God!"

Some of his attempts to control

her were downright humiliating. Her bathtime was private—he should have known that. It was a time she could count on to be completely alone to read. This meant she often took two baths a day, and the bath water therefore could never be called dirty. After stepping from her evening tub it was her habit to wash out her bra in the bathwater. Frank burst in one night and caught her at it. "My God, Diane, that's unsanitary!" he yelled. Still naked and feeling vulnerable, she slowly turned to look at him. She walked over, closed the door in his face, and locked it.

Then there was the job issue. Just the other night he'd warned her again. "You've got to do it sometime. You've got to demonstrate some earning power."

"Why? It isn't as if a person can pull a career right out of thin air."

"Look, normal women don't like to sit around. They go out and get jobs."

"So I'm not normal, huh? Then maybe I'd better get a shrink."

"There you go again! We don't need to pay for a shrink. You only need to get out of that chair and knock on a few doors of a few businesses."

"I already volunteer. You know I do Wednesday Meals on Wheels and keep their books for them. It's not like we live in a place with thousands of jobs available."

He flailed an impatient hand in her direction. "Look in the want ads. Even a receptionist job at the university would do."

She stared at him over her reading glasses. Demonstrate some

earning power: so legalistic and cold-sounding. She knew then, with dead certainty, that he had a secret agenda behind his bullying. All the more reason for her not to leave the comforting, type-filled pages of her latest suspense thriller by Tami Hoag. A female officer was trying to solve a case of a serial killer in order to be promoted to detective, and Diane was rooting for her with every fiber of her being.

She told Frank what he wanted to hear. "Okay, I'll look through the ads. Just let me finish my book first." That seemed safe; it had three hundred ninety-five pages.

As she burrowed back into the story, she could see out of the corner of her eye that he was meticulously piling the newspaper sections together, taking great care to lay the ad section on top. They would go upstairs later to separate bedrooms; her reading light bothered him.

Frank came home one night and slid up behind her, rubbing her shoulders not for her pleasure but more to indicate that he owned her whole body. "Okay, here's the skinny: come the first week in October I'm going away for two weeks duck hunting with the boys."

She turned and looked at him, incredulous. She knew he didn't know how to hunt and, what's more, had no "boys" close enough to be hunting buddies. He was talking in that high strained voice because every word that was coming out was a lie.

"Sure, okay. Get out your orange Day-Glo jacket and go hunting."

He looked at her sheepishly. "Well, I don't have one yet, but I'll get one."

This was it. The image of the translucent box with the trapped woman inside came back to her so vividly it could have been sitting on the table in front of her. She wasn't staying home for two weeks alone while her husband was out committing adultery.

Unbidden, there crowded into her mind all the plots of all the mysteries she'd ever read: death by stabbing, falling, bludgeoning, poisoning. She would try something simple first; if that didn't work she might have to get some self-help books out of the library and reread certain of her favorite mysteries. Meantime she picked up her copy of *How to Handle and Cook Food Safely*.

That night she cooked his chicken rare, bloody rare, concealing it in a yogurt and curry sauce. When she declined to share the dish with him, she gave a realistic excuse: her digestive system was touchy; it would only accept mushroom soup. He wolfed the chicken down and declared, "Delicious. Now cooking—that's something you can still do."

Then, annoyingly enough, his libido kicked up—she hadn't realized this was a fallout from eating undercooked chicken—and she knew she was in for a long evening of lovemaking. Not only did he not get salmonella, but he got a good dinner with a sexual bonus



at the end of it. She endured it stoically, realizing she had to do better research next time.

She considered tampering with his car and attempted to read up on cars and brakes, an area of complete mystification to her. Fortuitously, Turner Classic Movies put it plainer: one afternoon it showed a broody black and white film about how a handsome, no-good husband fooled around with the brakes of his rich wife's car. The physical layout was uncannily similar to theirs—a long hill going down from the house to the highway. Just like the wife in the movie, Frank could lose control and end up in a smashed heap at the bottom. The next day she got out the manual for the car, a BMW, and realized that figuring out how to tamper with his Beemer was about as easy as learning Cyrillic. Anyway, she couldn't stand the thought of having other people injured just because she needed to murder her husband.

It was a shame she didn't have anyone to share this with, even though she did go to a second sensitivity session with Sue. "So how's it going?" asked Sue as she picked Diane up.

"Frank's going hunting" was all she would tell her. She got a wall-eyed look from her friend. They drove the rest of the way in edgy silence.

It turned out that "inner greatness" was still the issue with the artists and would be for the entire sensitivity season. Diane was sunk in a mauve overstuffed chair, comfy as a kitten, sipping a deep

brown-colored cup of coffee when the guru told them all to close their eyes. "Now you are to free your mind of chaos," she told them. "That's the only way you can reach your creative core." Thirty pairs of eyes closed, and the large living room fell into a deep silence.

The guru suddenly broke the quiet. It was like grade school days when the teacher surprised the unwary student with a question: "Diane . . ." Diane jerked to attention. "You've not been here lately, Diane, so why don't you take your turn and share with us."

She froze, not knowing what to say. Naturally she couldn't come right out and tell these women that she was making progress working on her new inner greatness—murder.

"Uh, I can't give details," she said, "but I think I'm grabbing hold of my inner self."

"Wonderful," said the guru.

The first week in October arrived, and Frank went away on his purported hunting trip. She realized his absence was an opportunity to plan. Plan big. First, she re-read a few Agatha Christie novels sitting on her disordered bookshelves, ones in which the victim was poisoned. But arsenic, Agatha's favorite poison, was too obvious for Diane's purposes; she wanted an "accidental" death. She drove to the library in a neighboring town, found the section on poisons, and promptly lost herself in ancient volumes that went back to the ascendancy of the alchemists.

Looking up two hours later at the library clock, she realized the

place was about to close and she had accomplished nothing. Her gaze lighted upon a brightly colored sign, and she frowned. Libraries used to have a wonderful anonymity. People searched out books in dark wooden stacks with only their mastery of the Dewey Decimal System to guide them. Now dumb signs attached to plastic shelves shouted out each category of book. And sometimes there were even slogans like the one on the sign that had caught her eye: PERSONAL HEALTH—MAKE A BETTER LIFE FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.

Dumb or not, there was her answer staring at her. She hurried over, browsed through the personal health titles and found what she needed, a slim volume called *How to Live with a Bad Heart*. Her husband took a veritable cocktail of pills each day—surely there must be some way to skew the mix. In the book she read how heart patients like Frank who took diuretics for water retention had to watch their potassium carefully; obviously that was why his doctor had added a potassium supplement to his medical menu. From the book she learned that either too much or too little potassium could result in the same bitter consequences—arrhythmia or even cardiac arrest.

Hmm. What a shame.

When he came home from his trip, Diane unpacked his suitcase for him and was happy to find he had a half bottle left of his powerful fifteen hundred milligram, timed-release potassium chloride

tablets. If he had run low on them, she would have had to run out to a drugstore and buy at least a couple of bottles of the much weaker over-the-counter supplements.

She felt good about having discovered this use of potassium; here was something an ordinary postmortem might not uncover. The coroner probably would say to himself, why run fancy blood tests on a man who has a heart like an old innertube? Anyway, there might not be a need for the coroner; she wasn't sure she wanted to kill Frank—maybe just send him to the hospital for a day or two of utter misery.

Her returned husband had a self-satisfied aura about him. No wonder, she thought, since he'd probably been holed up for fourteen days getting laid by a prostitute. What had happened to this man on his trip, and how could she find out about it?

She had an idea that the credit card company would more easily divulge the information to the cardholder. Since she had a low, expressionless voice, it was no trouble at all to pretend she was Frank. "American Express? I've misplaced my receipts and need to get a quick tally on charges since the last statement." The voice on the other end promptly reeled off the information. She frantically scribbled it down, her pen hand pausing now and again in midair as she gasped in surprise at some of the charges.

He had been in San Francisco again! He'd stayed at The Mark, where meal tabs, she noticed, were



minimal sometimes, astronomical other times. She concluded darkly that Frank and his sweetie were occupied during the day and ate big dinners at night. Other bills damned him clearly for what he was, a womanizer. Almost three hundred dollars for two teddies purchased at Lilly's Intimate Boutique. More than eight hundred dollars for jade earrings from Tiffany's. This was no prostitute—this was a serious girlfriend, with a size ten figure!

Tiffany's was the last straw. Never in her life had she possessed anything from Tiffany's. That pretty much settled it. He had come home last night, and today, Friday, he would tell her about his plan for her.

She had a plan for him, too, but she put hers in motion at breakfast. She replaced the salt in the shaker with potassium chloride; he distributed it upon his morning eggs and declared them delicious. He also enjoyed his large bowl of sliced bananas. She could hardly wait to feed him his dinner of specially flavored beef bourguignon.

All the planning she had done for the big evening made her feel truly alive. Her eyes sparkled, and she swung her hips as she moved around the kitchen. She had found her greatness!

The adulterer stood in the doorway watching her, practically licking his lips. She had made it a habit to say as little to him as possible lately while she planned his murder. She went to the corner cupboard, took a little something

from it and carefully palmed it. Still he watched her. Finally she couldn't resist asking him, "What's the matter?"

"Since I got home . . . you just look so much more attractive."

She cast a glance at him, turned back to the stove, and added her final seasoning: three potassium pills. Then she sidled over to him and bumped hips with him.

"Well, thanks, big boy," she said playfully, but when he attempted to grab her with his long arms she wriggled away, pleading the need to stir the pot.

The beef bourguignon had to cook for another half hour, and she found herself getting jumpy. What would they do for half an hour? If she'd turned him on, she surely didn't want to go to bed again with a man she was about to poison. If he died, wouldn't that be premature necrophilia?

He solved the problem by issuing one of his orders. "Put the stew on low. Better still, put that black iron gizmo under it so we're sure it doesn't burn. Then grab the hors d'oeuvres and come with me." He stood in the kitchen doorway, his index finger beckoning her as if he were the master of the universe.

She sighed, took off her apron and put it on the counter, and followed him into the living room. He had poured himself a margarita from the batch she had prepared and greedily licked the crusted rim of the glass before taking his first sip. "Want one?" he asked, pointing to the cocktail pitcher.



"No, thanks," she said, and put a gentle hand on her tummy. "Digestion's out of sorts again—probably won't be able to eat anything but soup."

"That's a shame considering how good it smells. And do I ever like these." He picked up a toast triangle bedecked with tomato slice, basil, and fresh mozzarella, gave it a douse with the shaker, and popped it into his mouth.

She sank into a chair opposite him. He leaned forward, his fingers splayed around the margarita glass. "Diane, I have something important to tell you."

"So you said."

"I've been away . . ."

"I noticed."

He laughed. "Something you don't always do—notice." Another dousing with the shaker, another devoured tomato-toast triangle.

She watched him with narrowed eyes. "You were hunting. But strangely enough, I've heard nothing about what you caught, for instance. Ptarmigan, maybe? Duck?"

"You know I don't hunt. But I had to keep this a secret from you—it was just too good a surprise."

She pulled in her breath sharply. "A surprise—for me?"

"Yes. Actually, I was in San Francisco, looking for a house."

"You mean—we'll be moving there?"

"Yes. I wangled a transfer from the company and went out and found us a house on a hill in Berkeley that you'll love."

"My God, I can't believe it," she said, sitting back. "A house. And

in Berkeley." She nearly dropped her guard and let in an unused emotion: hope.

He smiled. "I know you'll love it. It's old. Has three floors; needs some refurbishing, though." The smile vanished, and she watched his face fall into its accustomed down lines. "The place cost a bundle, and even at that, I had one bitch of a fight to get it away from another creep who wanted it. Had to pay top damned dollar—including a private bonus to the broker."

Why did he always have to turn over the rock to find the crawling things? Quietly she said, "You mean the house is all signed, sealed, and delivered. And you like it. When are we going to move?"

"By Christmas. That's when the closing is. We'll have to sell this place, of course. It will be a lot of work for you, cleaning up the corners, throwing away things that won't look good when realtors come to show it." He swept a hand at the unkempt bookshelves full of her beloved mysteries. "You have to get rid of those, for instance."

Her stomach lurched as she stared at the book spines with the names of all her old friends—Van Dine, Christie, Simon Brett, Barr. Getting rid of her books was like asking her to get rid of her children.

He turned back to her with that utterly cold expression she knew so well. "And of course I want something in return."

She lowered her head and raised her eyes to look at him. "In return for—a house in Berkeley?"



"Yes. You know, like the old days, when I used to demand things of you. In return, I expect you to go out and take a course in computers, then get yourself a job."

What would he do if she said no—leave her here in the Midwest?

She smiled faintly at him.

"You're making lots of money, aren't you, Frank?"

"Yes," he said. "It isn't the money. It's that I want you to get off your dead ass for a change."

Dead ass. With great difficulty she managed another smile. It was a unilateral decision to move to California and to buy a certain house in a certain neighborhood, with not an ounce of input from her. She was to accept it just as a devout Catholic accepted the decisions of John Paul II. Nothing would ever change in her marriage except that Diane would go out and take a support job in an office, making it easier for Frank to divorce her. That's what earning power would do for her! After a stingy, acrimonious settlement he would ease Diane out of the house on the hill and ease the floozie in.

Until this moment she realized she hadn't taken her "greatness" seriously.

But she would now.

She jumped to her feet and said, "Hold on a minute, Frank. I have

to check on dinner." She went straight for the corner cupboard in the kitchen and took out the potassium chloride tablets. She paused while she multiplied milligrams, then divided by number of portions. She knew she mustn't go overboard, since too many pills would spoil the taste.

Together with the bananas, the tomatoes, and the potassium posing as salt in the shaker and on the margarita, three more pills ought to be enough. After all, why overkill?

Hypnotically she watched the pills, like little white lifeboats, as they sank into the brown, bubbling gravy.

Giving her hair a firm shove back from her face, she returned to the living room. She went over to Frank and leaned down and took his hand. "That's exciting news, about moving," she said. "But before we talk any more, come have some stew."

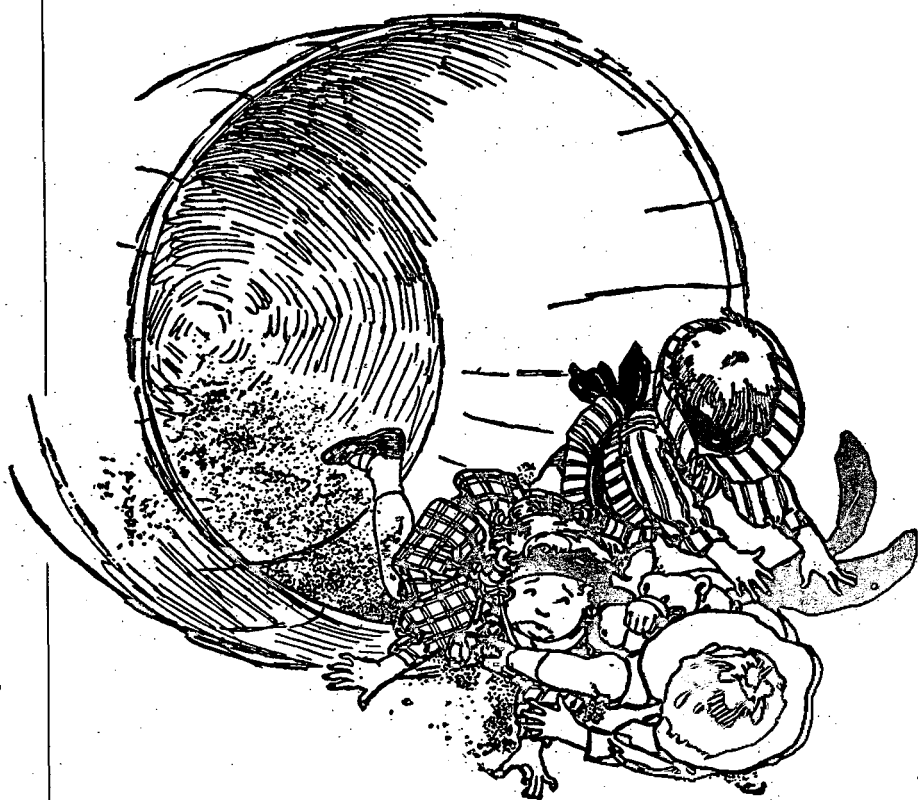
She tried to pull him up, and he tensed his leg muscles to help, springing to his feet beside her.

"What a wife," he said. "Sometimes you're such a drag. But occasionally you downright amaze me. Something's given you a new —" He stopped, searching for the right words.

"—inner greatness?" she suggested, smiling up at him.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

A STUDY IN PIRACY



Josephine Dodge Daskam

Illustration by F. Y. Cory

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 4/99

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It might not have occurred to you to find the Head Captain terrible to look upon, had you seen him first without his uniform. There seems to be something essentially pacific in the effect of a broad turnover gingham collar, a blue neck ribbon, and a wide straw hat, and you might be pardoned for thinking him a rather mild person. But could you have encountered him in a black cambric mask with pinked edges, a broad sash of Turkey red wound tightly about his waist, and that wide collar turned up above his ears—the tie conspicuous for its absence—you might have sung another tune. His appearance was at such a time nothing short of menacing.

The Lieutenant was distinctly less impressive. His sash, though not so long as the Head Captain's, was forever coming untied and trailing behind him, and as he often retreated rapidly, he stumbled and fell over it twice out of three times. This gave it a draggled and spiritless look. Moreover, he was not allowed to turn his collar up except on Saturdays, and the one his sister had made him from wrapping paper had an exotic, not to say amateur-theatrical, effect that was far from convincing. The eyeholes in his mask, too, were much too large—showing indeed the greater part of both cheeks, each of which was provided with a deep dimple. Seen in the daytime, he was not—to speak confidentially—very awesome.

As for the Vicar—well, there were obstacles in the way of her presenting such an appearance as she would have liked. In the first place, there was not enough Turkey red to go evenly round, and to her disgust she had been obliged to put up with a scant three-quarters of a yard—not a wide strip at that. What was by courtesy called the Vicar's waist was not far from three-quarters of a yard in circumference, which fact compelled her to strain her sash tightly in order to be able to make even a small hard knot, to say nothing of bows and ends. She had no collar of any kind—her frocks were gathered into bands at the neck—and she was not allowed to imitate the Lieutenant's; who, though generally speaking a mush of concession, held out very strongly for this outward and visible sign of a presumable inward and spiritual superiority. So the Vicar, in a wild attempt at masculinity, had privately borrowed a high linen collar of her uncle. The shirts in her uncle's drawer had printed inside them *Wear a seventeen-and-a-half collar with this shirt*, so you will not be surprised to learn that the Vicar occasionally fell into the collar, so to speak, and found herself most effectually muzzled.

But the worst was her mask. Her hair came down in a heavy bang almost to her straight brown eyebrows; her round brown eyes were



*From The Madness of Philip by Josephine Dodge Daskam; McClure, Phillips & Co., New York, 1902.
Illustrated by F. Y. Cory.*

somewhat shortsighted; her eyeholes were too small. In consequence of these facts, whenever it was desirable or necessary to see an inch before her nose, she was obliged to push the mask up over her bang, where it waved straight out and up and looked like some high priest's mitre.

Her title was due to her uncle, who, to do him justice, was as innocent of his influence in the matter as of the loss of his collar.

"When a person isn't the head of the Pirates but is an officer just the same and has some say about things, what do you call that?" she asked him abruptly one day. He was reading at the time and not unnaturally understood her to say "the head of the parish."

"Why, that's called a vicar, I suppose you mean," he answered.

"A vicker! Does he have some say?"

"Some say?"

"Yes—" impatiently "—some say. He hasn't got to do the way the others tell him *all* the time, has he?"

"Oh dear no. Don't you know Mr. Wright down at the chapel? He's called the vicar. He really manages it, I think. Of course it's not like being the rector—"

"Chapel? Is that the only kind of vicker, like Mr. Wright?"

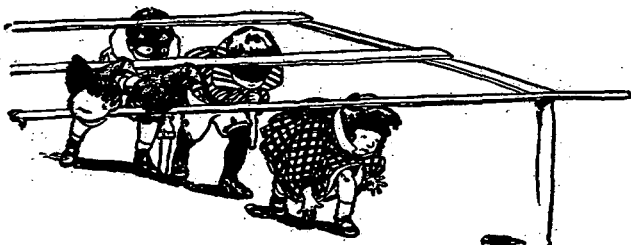
"Why of course not, silly! There are lots of different kinds."

"Oh!" and she retired, practicing the word. The others were much impressed by her cleverness in discovering such a fascinating title. It savored of *wicked* and *villain*, to begin with; and pursuing the advantage of their previous ignorance of it, she invented several privileges and perquisites of the office, which to deny would argue their lack of information on the subject, a thing she knew they would never own.

One of these was the right to summon the band, when the Head Captain had decided on an expedition, to any meeting place she saw fit, and though in a great many ways her superiors found her a nuisance, the Lieutenant in particular objecting in a nagging, useless sort of way to most of her suggestions, they could not but admit that her selection of mysterious, unsuspected rendezvous was often brilliantly original.

On one especial occasion, a warm afternoon late in June when the houses and yards were all quiet and the very dogs lay still in the shade, the Vicar led them softly to the chicken yard, mystified them by crawling through a broken glass frame into the covered roost, crouching along beneath the perches, and going out again by the legitimate door without stopping to speak. This effectually silenced the Lieutenant—the chicken house seemed an old ruse to him, and he was sniffing in preparation for the expression of his opinion. Out across the yard and twice around an enormous hogshead they walked solemnly. Such a prelude must mean a great finale, and the Head Captain felt decidedly curious. The Vicar paused, made a short detour for the purpose of getting two empty boxes, piled them one on the other,

and lightly swung herself into the cask. A loud thud announced her safe arrival at the bottom, and flushed with delight at the incomparable secrecy of the thing, the Head Captain followed her. The Lieutenant, grumbling as usual, and very nearly hanging himself in his



sash, which caught on the edge, tumbled after, and standing close together in the great barrel they grinned consciously at each other.

The Head Captain broke the silence. "Are we all here?" he demanded, his voice waking strange and hollow echoes.

"Yes!" replied the Vicar delightedly, bursting with pride.

"Aye, aye!" said the Lieutenant with careful formality.

"Then listen here!" The Head Captain spoke in a hoarse whisper. "This'll be a diff'rent day. This is going to be the real thing. Today *we're going to steal!*"

The Vicar gasped. "Really steal?" she whispered.

"Steal what?" said the Lieutenant with a noncommittal gruffness.

"I don't know till I get there," replied the Head Captain grandly. "Gold, I suppose, or treasures or something like that. Of course, if we're caught—"

The Lieutenant sucked in his breath with a peculiar whistling noise—one of his most envied accomplishments—and ran his fingernail with a grating sound around his side of the barrel.

"Jim Elder stole some apples from my father's barn, and my father licked him good," he suggested.

"Apples! Apples!" The Head Captain frowned terribly, adding with biting irony: "I s'pose Jim Elder's a Pirate! I s'pose he wears a uniform! I s'pose he knows the ways this gang knows! I s'pose he meets in a barrel like this! Huh?" There was no answer, and the Head Captain settled his mask more firmly. "Come on!" he said.

They looked at the sharp edge of the hogshead; it was far away. They looked inquiringly at the Vicar; she dropped her eyes. Oh, Woman, in your hours of ease you can devise fine secret places, you can lead us to them, but can you bring us back to the outer world and the reality you seduced us from? There was an embarrassing pause. The seconds seemed hours. Would they die in this old, smelly barrel?

The Head Captain smiled to himself. "I guess you kids never'd git

out o' here unless I showed you how!" he remarked cheerfully. "Forward! March!" He took the one step possible and scowled because they did not follow him. "Don't you see?" he said irritably. "When I say 'three,' fall over. Now, one—two—three!"

He pushed the Lieutenant and the Vicar against the side of the barrel and precipitated himself against them. The barrel wavered, tottered, and fell with a bang on its side, the subordinate officers jouncing and gasping, unhappy cushions for their Head Captain, who crawled out over them, adjusted his collar, and strode off across the chicken yard. At the gate they caught up with him.

"Lieutenant!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Go straight ahead and watch out for us. Whistle three times if the coast is clear. Beware of—of anything you see!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

The Lieutenant slunk off, a peculiar caution in the slope of his shoulders and his long, noiseless stride. He rounded the barn and disappeared from sight. There was a moment of suspense. Suddenly he appeared again, his hand raised warningly.

"Sst, sst!" he hissed. Promptly they skipped behind the woodhouse door. In a moment a man's footsteps were audible; somebody was swinging by the barn, whistling as he went. He called out to the cook as he went by, "Pretty hot, ain't it? Hey! I say it's pretty hot!"

He was gone. He had absolutely no idea of their presence. The first of the delicious thrills had begun. The Lieutenant, from his post behind the barn door, could have leaned out and touched him, but he had no idea. From that moment the scenery changed. The yard was enchanted ground, the buildings strange and doubtful, the stretches between haven and haven full of dangers.

Presently three soft whistles broke the silence. They glided out around the barn and scaled the first fence. The Head Captain stopped to caution, the Lieutenant became hopelessly complicated in his sash, so the Vicar got over first. Though plump, she was light on her feet and had been known to push the others over in her nervous haste; she threw herself upon a solid board fence in an utterly reckless way, striking the top flat on her stomach and sliding, slipping down the other side. Her method, thoroughly ridiculous and unscientific as it was, invariably succeeded, and she usually waited a few seconds for them



after picking herself up. When one climbs after the most approved fashion, employing as few separate motions as possible, making every one tell, the result of such slippery, panting scrambles as the Vicar's is particularly irritating. The success of the amateur is never pardonable.

"Which way, Head Captain?"

A dusty forefinger indicated the neighboring barn.

"Secret way or door?"

"Secret way."

They cast hurried glances about them: nobody was in sight. At the corner of the barn the Lieutenant again performed scout duty, and his three whistles brought them to a back entrance hardly noticeable to the chance explorer of stable yards—a low door into a disused cow-house.

Softly they stole in, softly peeped into the barn. It lay placid and empty, smelling of leather and hay and horses, with barrels of grain all about, odd bits of harness, and tins of wagon grease, wisps of straw, and broken tools scattered over the floor. Broad bands of sunlight streaked everything. They crept through a lane of barrels, and mounted a rickety stair, heart in mouth. Who might be at the top?



A moment's pause, and then the Head Captain nodded.

"All right, men," he breathed.

They went carefully through the thick hay that strewed the upper floor, avoiding the cracks and pits that loosened boards and decayed planking offered the unwary foot. With unconscious directness the Lieutenant turned to the great pile of hay that usually marked the end of this expedition, but the Head Captain frowned and passed by the short ladder that led to the summit. He pushed through an avenue of old machinery, crawled over two old sleighs and under a grindstone frame, and emerged into a dim, almost empty corner.

The heat of the hay was intense. The stuffy, dry smell of it filled their nostrils. Where the bright, wide ray of sunlight fell from the little window in the apex, the air was seen to be dancing and palpitating with millions of tiny particles that kept up a continuous churning motion. The perspiration dripped from the Vicar's round cheeks; she panted with the heat.

Walking on his tiptoes, the Head Captain sought the darkest depths

of the corner, stumbling over an old covered chest. He stopped, he put his hand on the lid. The two attendant officers gasped. The Head Captain, with infinite caution, lifted that lid.

Suddenly a dull, echoing crash shook the floor. The Vicar squeaked in nervous terror. I say squeaked because with grand presence of mind the Lieutenant smothered her certain scream in the folds of his ever-ready sash, and only a faint chirp disturbed the deathly silence that followed the crash. The Head Captain's hand trembled, but he held the cover of the chest and waited. Again that hollow boom, followed by a rustling, as of hay being dragged down, and a champing, swal-



lowing, gurgling sound.

"Nothin' but the horses," whispered the Lieutenant, removing his sash. "Shut up, now!"

The Vicar breathed again. The Head Captain bent over the chest.

"Oh! Oh! Oh, fellows! Look a-here!" His voice shook. His eyes stared wide. They crept nearer and caught big breaths.

There in the old chest, carelessly thrown together, uncovered, unprotected, lay a glittering wealth of strange gold and silver treasures. Knobs, cups, odd pierced shallow saucers, countless rings as big as small cookies, plain bars of metal, heavy rods.

The Head Captain's eyes shone feverishly, he breathed quick.

"Here, here, here!" he whispered, and thrust his hands into the box. He ladled out a handful to the Vicar. For a moment she shrank away, and then, as a shallow, carved gold-colored thing touched her hand, her cheeks heated red, she seized it and hid it in her pocket.

"Gimme another," she begged softly, "gimme that shiny little cup!"

If there had been any doubt as to the heavenly reality of the thing, it was all over now. No more need the Head Captain's swelling words fill out the bare gaps of the actual state of the case. Here were the

things—this was no pretend-game. Here was danger, here was crime, here was glittering wealth all unguarded, and no one knew but them!

They gloated over the chest, their hot fingers handled eagerly every ring and big chain. Only the Lieutenant, sucking in his breath, excitedly broke the ecstatic silence.

The Head Captain first mastered himself. "Hm, that's enough—from *here!*" he commanded with dreadful implication. "Come on. They'll kill us if they catch us! Soft, now. Don't breathe so loud, Vicar!"

Off in a different direction he led them, having closed the box softly, and instead of making for the stairs stopped before three square openings in the floor. He lay flat on his stomach and peered down one. It opened directly above the manger, and when he had cast down two armfuls of hay and measured the distance with his eye, they saw that he meant to drop through and realized that his blood was up and heaven knew where he would stop that day.

The Vicar caught the idea before the Lieutenant and, with characteristic impatience, was through the second hole before the third member of the band had thrown down his first armful. Light as a cat she dropped, scrambled out of the manger, and as a step sounded in the outer barn, dragged the Lieutenant through in an agony of apprehension, stumbled across the great heap of stable refuse, and crouched, palpitating, behind the cowhouse door.

The Head Captain, whom crises calmed and immediate danger heartened, himself crept back into the stable to gather from the sound of the steps the direction taken by the intruder.

He was talking to the horse. "Want some dinner? I'll bet you do. Stealing hay, was you? That'll never do." It was enough. Soon he would go upstairs to count over the treasures—who would ever have supposed that this simple-looking stableman had known for years of such a trove?—and then woe to the Pirates!

"Come on, you! Run for your life!" he shot at them, and they tore across the yard, over a back fence, and across a vacant lot, panting, stumbling, muttering to each other, the Vicar crying with excitement. The Lieutenant caught his foot in his sash and fell miserably, mistaking them for arms of the law as they loyally turned back to pick him up and fighting them with feeble punches. They dragged him through a hedge and took refuge in an old toolhouse.

Slowly they got back breath. The delicious horror of pursuit was lifted from them. It appeared that they were safe. "You goin' home, now?" said the Lieutenant huskily. Home? Home? Was the fellow mad? The Head Captain vouchsafed no answer.

"Forward! March!" He strode out of the toolhouse and made for the barn. A large dog barked, and a voice called, "Down, Danny, down!" They returned hastily, and climbed laboriously out of a little window



on the other side of the toolhouse, striking a beeline for the adjoining property. The treasure jingled in their pockets as they ran stealthily into this barn. The last restraint was cast away, they were on new territory. A succession of back yard cuts had resulted in their turning a corner, and had they gone openly and in the light of day out into the street, they would have found themselves in another part of the town. The Head Captain crept in through a low window. He was entirely wrapped up in his dreadful character. Blind to consequences, hardly looking to see if the others followed him, he worked his way over the sill and stared about him. Imagination was no longer necessary. No fine-spun trickery was needed to turn the too-familiar places into weird dens, the well-known barns into menacing danger traps. Here

all was new, untried, of endless possibilities.

It was a clean, spacious spot. Great shadowy white-draped carriages stood along the sides; a smell of varnish and new leather prevailed. On the walls hung fascinating garden tools: quaint-nosed watering pots, coils of hose, a lawn fountain. All was still. The Head Captain strode across the floor, extending his hand with a majestic sweep.

"All these things—all of 'em—anything we want, we can take!" he muttered, but not to them. They could plainly see he was talking to himself. Rapt in wild dreams of unchecked depredation, he stamped about, fingering the garden hose, prying behind the carriages, tossing his head and breathing hard.

Suddenly came a step as of a man walking on gravel. It drew nearer, nearer. For one awful moment the Lieutenant seemed in danger of thinking himself a frightened little boy in a strange barn; he plucked at his sash nervously. The next instant two hands fell from opposite directions on his shoulders.

"Get into a carriage—quick, quick, quick!" hissed the Head Captain, and he heard the Vicar panting as she shoved him under the flap of the sheet that draped a high-swung victoria. She was with him, huddled close beside him on the floor of the carriage, and it seemed hardly credible that the clatter of the Head Captain's hasty dive into the neighboring surrey could have failed to catch the ear of the man who entered the barn. But he heard nothing. He walked by them lazily, he paused and struck a match on the wheel of the victoria, and the smell of tobacco crept in under the sheet. It seemed to the Vicar that the thumping of her heart must shake the carriage. She dared not gasp

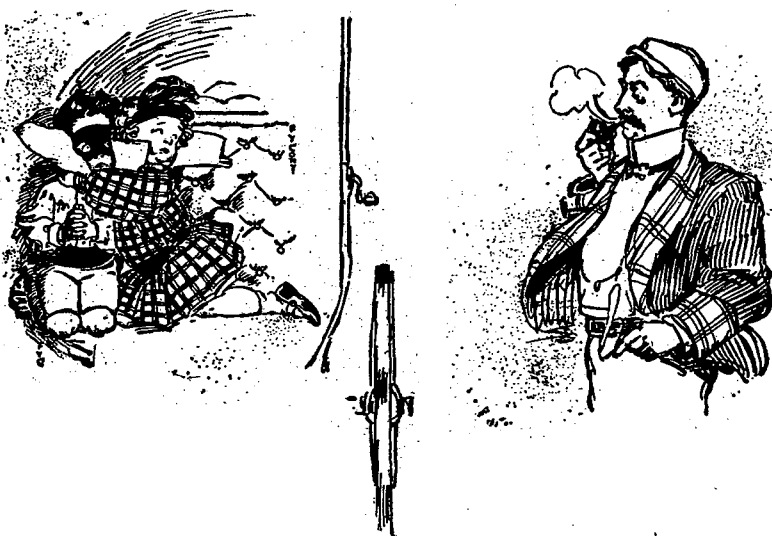
for breath, but she knew she should burst if that man stood there much longer. It could not be possible that he wouldn't find them. Ah, how little he knew! Right under his very pipe lay those who could take away everything in his old barn if they chose. Perhaps the very surry that now held that terrible Head Captain might be gone ere morning, he had such ambitions, such vaulting dreams.

Thump! thump! thump! went her heart, and the Lieutenant's breath whistled through his teeth. Never in their lives had such straining excitement possessed their every nerve. Oh, go on, go on, or we shall scream!

He sauntered by, he opened some door at the rear. The latch had all but clicked when a hollow but unmistakable sneeze burst from the Head Captain's surry. Immediately the door opened again. The man took a step back. All was deathly still; the echoes of their leader's fateful sneeze alone thrilled the hearts of his anguished followers.

"Humph!" muttered a deep voice, "that's queer. Anybody out there?"

Silence. Silence that buzzed and hummed and roared in the Vicar's ears.



"Queer—I thought I heard . . . Damn queer!" muttered the man. The Lieutenant shuddered. That was a word whose possibilities he hesitated to consider. Piracy is bad enough, heaven knows, but profanity is surely worse.

The latch clicked. After an artful pause the nose of the Head Cap-

tain appeared, inserted at an inquiring angle between the two sheets that draped the surrey. Cautiously he swung himself down, cautiously he tiptoed toward the others. "Sst! Sst! All safe!" he whispered. They scrambled out, and a glance at his reserved frown taught them that the recent sneeze must not be mentioned.

Like cats they crept up the stairs, and only the Head Captain's great presence of mind prevented their falling backward down the flight, for there on the hay before them lay a man stretched at full length, breathing heavily. His face was a deep red in color, and a strong, sweetish odor filled the loft. They turned about at the Head Captain's warning gesture, and waited while he stole fearfully up and examined the man. When he rejoined them, there was a new triumph in his eyes, a greater exaltation in his hurried speech.

"Come here, Lieutenant!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"This is a dead pirate. He died defending—defending his life. He will be discovered if we leave him here."

This seemed eminently probable. The Lieutenant looked alarmed. He took a step or two on the loft floor and returned, relieved.

"No, he ain't dead, either," he announced, "he's only as—"

"He is dead," repeated the Head Captain firmly. "Dead, I say. You shut up, will you? And we must bury him."

The Lieutenant looked sulky and chewed the end of his sash. To be so put down before the Vicar! It was hardly decent. And she, in her usual and irritating way, grasped the situation immediately. "We must bury him right off," she whispered excitedly, "before that man gets up here."

"That man," added the Head Captain, "is a dreadful bad fellow, I tell you. If he was to catch us up here, I don't know—I don't know but he'd—here, come back, Lieutenant! Come back, I say!"

They stole up to the dead pirate, who had not the appearance attributed by popular imagination to those who have died nobly. The Lieutenant was frankly in the dark as to his superior officer's intentions.

"If you take him off to bury him, he'll wake—"

"Hush your noise!" interrupted the Head Captain angrily.

The Vicar could not wait for anyone else's initiative but began feverishly pulling up handfuls of hay and piling them lightly over the dead pirate's boots. The Head Captain covered the man's body with two hastily snatched armfuls and, as the Vicar's courage gave out at this point, coolly laid a thin wisp directly over the red face. The pirate was buried. It gave one a thrill to see hardly a dim outline of his figure.

"Hats off, my men," whispered the Head Captain, hoarse with emotion, "and we will say a prayer. Lieutenant," with a noble renunciation in his expression, "you may say the prayer!"

The Lieutenant was touched, and melted from his sulky scorn.

"What'll I say? What'll I say?" he muttered excitedly. "Not 'Hollow Be Thy Name'? That's a long one."

"Now I lay—" suggested the Vicar tremulously.

"Pshaw, no!" interrupted the Head Captain. "Not a baby thing like that! If you don't know one, Lieutenant, I'll make one up."

"No, I'll say one," urged the Lieutenant hastily. "I'll say one, Captain. I'll say my colick that I had yesterday. Wait up a second till I remember it."

The heavy, regular breathing continued to come out from under the hay where lay the martyred pirate. The hens in a nearby henyard cackled shrilly, the trilling of an indefatigable canary in the coachman's rooms rose and fell through the hot June air. Red and dripping with the heat, dusty and sprinkled with the hay, the outlaws stood, solemn and tense, starting at the least fancied sound from below.

The Lieutenant cleared his throat, shut his eyes tight to assist his memory, and began his burial service: "*Almighty 'n' everlastin' God, who's given unto us, Thy servants, grace by the c'nfession of a true faith t' acknowledge th' glory of th' Eternal Trinity, and—and—*"

"*And in the power of the Divine Majesty—*" prompted the Vicar ostentatiously.

"*Will you keep still, miss? Majesty to worship the Unity, we beseech Thee that Thou wouldst keep 's—keep 's steadfast, er, wouldst keep 's steadfast—*" The Lieutenant paused helplessly.

"*In this faith,*" added the Vicar with triumph, dashing on with almost unintelligible rapidity, "*and evermore defend 's from all 'dversities, who livest 'n' reignest one God, world 'thout end. Amen!*" She took a necessary breath and pushed back her mask still farther from her tumbled bang.



The Head Captain was visibly impressed. It had never occurred to him to say a collect. The Lieutenant was not such a poor stick, after all.

Gravely he led the way downstairs and climbed abstractedly through the little window. Something was evidently on his mind.

"The last time I saw that pirate," he began.

The Lieutenant tripped and sat down abruptly.

"The—the last time you saw him?" he stammered.

"That's what I said," responded the Head Captain shortly. "The last time I saw him I didn't s'pose I'd have to bury him. He'd just got a lot of treasure and stuff and—sst! sst! For your lives!"

They scuttled off desperately. The ground was new to them, and had it not been for providential garbage barrels and outhouses, they could hardly have hoped to conceal themselves from the man who was raking up the yard. To avoid him they dashed straight through his barn and rounded a summerhouse without perceiving a small teaparty going on there till they ran through it, to their own sick terror and the abject amazement of the teaparty. They tore through a hedge, panted a doubtful moment in a woodhouse, then took up their headlong flight with the vague, straining pace of crowded dreams. On, on, on. Slip be-



hind that lilac clump—wait! Sst! Sst! Then get along! Oh, hurry, hurry! Pick up your sash! Whose *is* this yard? Never mind! hurry!

They dropped exhausted under their own pear tree.

"My, but that was a close shave! I thought they'd got us sure!" breathed the Head Captain.

"Wh—who were they?" asked the Lieutenant, round-eyed.

"Who were they? Who were they?" the Head Captain repeated scornfully. "The idea! I guess you'd find out who they were if they caught you once!"

The Lieutenant shot a sly glance at the Vicar. Did she know? You never could tell, she pretended so. She shivered at the Head Captain's implication. "Yes, sirree, I guess you'd find out then," she assured him.

Suddenly the Head Captain's face fell. "The treasure!" he gasped. "It's gone!" In dismay they turned out their pockets. All those vessels of gold

and vessels of silver were lost—lost in that last mad rush. All but the shallow gold-colored saucer in the Vicar's hand. They looked at it enviously, but honor kept them silent. To the Vicar belonged the spoils.

"I don't see what good they were anyhow," began the Lieutenant morosely.

"'Good?'" mimicked the Head Captain, enraged. "'Good?' Why, didn't we *steal* 'em?" Slowly they took off their uniforms and hid them under the back piazza. Slowly the occasion faded into the light of common day; objects lost their mystery, the barn and the toolhouse imperceptibly divested themselves of all glamour. It was only the back yard.

The Head Captain and the Lieutenant threw themselves down under the pear tree again and fell into a doze. The Vicar, grasping her treasure, stumbled up the back stairs and took an informal nap on the landing. It must have been at this time that the gold-colored saucer slipped from her hand, for when she woke on the sofa in the upper hall, it was nowhere about.

The same hands that had transferred her to that more conventional resting place bathed and attired her for supper, and though two hours ago she would, as a pirate, have exulted in her guilty possession, somehow as a neat, small person in pink ribbons she felt shy of approaching the subject and ate her custard in silence.

Sometime during the hours of the next long morning, as she played quietly on the piazza, she caught her mother's voice, slightly raised to reach the cook's ear: "Why, I suppose it is. I shouldn't wonder, Maggie. I suppose the child picked it up somewhere. Did you hear that, Fred, about Mr. Van Tuyl's best harness? All scattered through half the back yards on Winter Street. All those brass ornaments, and parts of the very side lamps, too. Fortunately they found it all. Take that piece, Maggie, and give it to the man when you see him."

The Vicar sighed. Just then she felt, with the poet, that homekeeping hearts are happiest.



BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



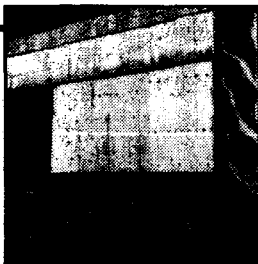
Mystery readers fond of bibliophilic sleuths will surely warm up to Marianne Macdonald's newest novel. **Ghost Walk** (St. Martin's, \$21.95) is the second adventure for Dido Hoare, London antiquarian bookseller. Dido, a single new mother, works hard to make the bookshop self-supporting and stays close to her retired academic father. Thanks to a recent inheritance from her child's deceased father, she now has some working capital as well as a few luxuries. But it was probably her stubbornness, or her no-nonsense practicality, that attracted the attention of one of her more educated customers. Dido has always suspected that the shabby man who could read Greek was homeless. She will learn much, much more about Tom Ashe—and about her father's wartime activities—before the novel's end. Of course, she has to stay alive in order to find out everyone's secrets. The book business background is a treat, the historical slant is an added bonus—all in all, a comfortably entertaining read.

Followers of Anne Perry's series featuring Monk, Hester, and Sir Oliver Rathbone definitely won't want to miss **A Breach of Promise** (Fawcett, \$25). Oliver has taken the case of a brilliant young architect, Killian Melville, who is being sued by his own patron for backing out of a marriage proposal to his patron's daughter. Melville will say nothing against the girl, whom he is clearly fond of; he simply vows that he never intended a betrothal because he is resolved never to marry. But Victorian mores demand that Melville be sued to protect the girl's honor. In an effort to save his client, Oliver hires Monk to investigate. Meanwhile, Hester nurses a young soldier wounded in an Indian uprising. He's home now, but his physical pain and horrendous memories threaten to rob him of the young wife he left behind in England when he went off to war. Perry ties all her threads together neatly in an exciting eleventh hour ending. But as always, it is the evocation of the characters and the period in which they lived that makes her story so irresistible.

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The November Mysterious Photograph contest was won by James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida. (For the second time in a row—special congratulations to Mr. Hagerty!) Honorable mentions go to Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; M. B. Kerrigan of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Tom Keffer of Homer, Alaska;



Jacob Wilhelm of Coquille, Oregon; Deanna Anderson of Las Cruces, New Mexico; T. J. Johnson of Aurora, Illinois; Jack E. Romig of Largo, Florida; Dick Saxe of Toledo, Ohio; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; and Dorothy Tabor of Cookeville, Tennessee.

Henri Siberman, N.Y.C.

STAGE FLIGHT by James Hagerty

"Welcome back," said Kate. "Heard you broke parole."

"Where's Sissy?" Duffy responded as she checked out the cell.

"Sissy's been in the hole for a month."

"Solitary?" asked Duffy.

"She started a fire and tried to escape. The warden had this stage built for Revue Night. Sissy painted flames on it, and it really did catch on fire during her skit from Shakespeare."

"Sissy did a skit?"

"She was wearing a witch's costume and had this pot with a fire under it while she danced and chanted about burning wood. She tossed stuff into the pot . . . chicken bones, pieces of meat, even a bird somebody caught in the exercise yard."

"And they won't let us smoke in our cells?"

"Revue Night was special," said Kate. "The ones who did skits got away with things. When the curtain caught on fire, the guards panicked, and that's when Sissy made a break for it. They caught her hiding in a delivery van. But she warned them."

"Really?"

"She kept chanting, 'Burning wood,' and dancing around the pot."

"That's Birnam Wood, Kate."

"Yeah. Burning wood. And she was chanting, 'Trouble, trouble, boil this rubble.' Stuff like that."

"What else?"

"Oh yeah. 'Out of this damned spot!' That's what she yelled when the fire started and she took off. The word is, she's not taking solitary too well. I bet she's wondering when us three are gonna meet again."

"No doubt," said Duffy.

(continued from page 140)

Fans of Virginia Rich's novels featuring a thoroughly charming and spunky widow named Eugenia Potter can only rejoice that well-known author Nancy Pickard established a warm correspondence with the series' originator before her death. Because of that connection, Rich's husband asked Pickard to complete an unfinished novel, much to my delight. The second of these collaborations is now out, and **The Blue Corn Murders** (Delacorte, \$21.95) would surely make Virginia Rich proud. The discovery of several shards of old pottery on her ranch sends Eugenia impulsively off to a week-long stay at the Medicine Wheel Archaeological Camp. The brochure promises hiking, camping, and a respectful review of several ancient sites with a knowledgeable guide, as well as first-class dining. The last sells Eugenia, an amateur cook herself, and off she goes. All too soon, however, she finds herself examining corpses instead of old bones. Pickard has found Rich's old recipe: a hearty heroine, a fresh setting, and crisp dialogue spiced with just the right blend of adventure and familiarity.

If mysteries that are light on gore and violence and heavy on wit and character are your cup of tea, then don't forget Jill Churchill's series featuring Jane Jeffry. The titles alone are enough to bring a smile to a weary reader's visage—but don't stop there. Her newest in paperback, **Fear of Frying** (Avon, \$5.99), sends Jane and her best friend Shelley off into the Wisconsin woods. The two ladies are part of a group appointed by the town council who have been assigned the task of assessing a summer camp for schoolkids. They have the camp to themselves for the weekend, and the cosy cabin Jane and Shelley share silences Jane's grumbles about the pitfalls and discomforts of the grand outdoors. That's until the two women find a murdered man near the campfire. If you like to try to outguess the amateur sleuth in the mysteries you read, look to Churchill for a fair-play plot hidden among the engaging characters and the giggles.

In hardcover, Charles Todd's **A Test of Wills** (Bantam, \$5.99) earned rave reviews and nominations for two awards, and one can see why. The year is 1919, and England is still reeling from the devastation of World War I. For Scotland Yard Inspector Ian Rutledge, recovery from shell shock has been slow; it's vital that he return to work and that he prove himself the canny detective he once was. Too bad that his first case—the bloody murder of a respected military man in the victim's own village—promises to be a very hot potato. Todd's flawed hero, his choice of period setting, the twist to his plot, and the quality of his writing make this a standout debut of what many hope will be a series.

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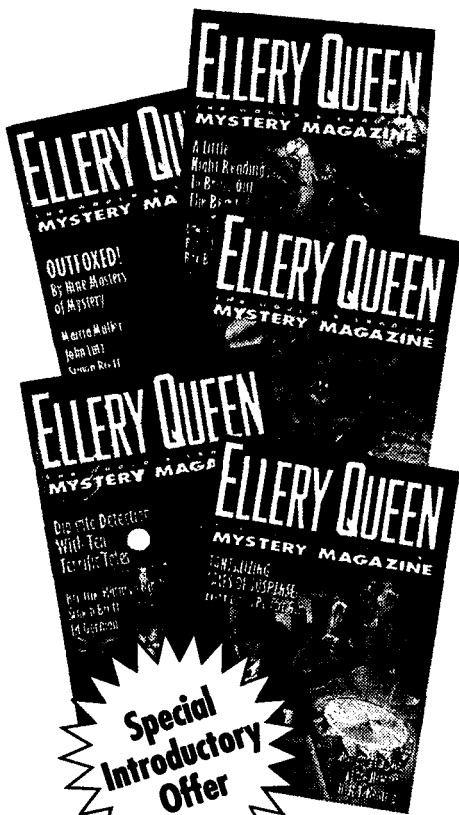
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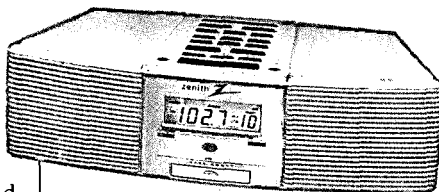
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